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THE SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

THE
SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER,

AUTHOR OF "THE WOOING O'T," "THE FRERES," "SECOND LIFE,"
"MONA'S CHOICE," ETC. ETC.

In Three Volumes.

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THE

SNARE OF THE FOWLER.

CHAPTER XX.

PATCHWORK.

MRS. DALLAS had had her share of disappointment and mortification, chiefly owing to her uneasy ambition, her restless desire to win a high social position, to accomplish which she needed a much larger fortune than she possessed. It was this which gave such bitterness to the tantalising circumstances of her husband's death only a few days before that of his wealthy uncle.

But nothing she had hitherto experienced at all approached the cruel defeat she had sustained at the hands of an insignificant girl, whose character, whose intelligence even, she despised—a penniless dependent, whom she could *not* dominate, and who mocked her skill, her experience, by a clever, daring, successful escape.

Was Myra deeper than herself? Had she accomplices outside whose existence she had contrived to conceal from her benefactress? Nothing could convince her (Mrs. Dallas) that Mrs. Keene was not the chief agent in Myra's flight, and her fury with the detective set to watch her, when he failed, was none the less intense because of the careful suppression of its indications. He was contemptuously dismissed when he declared he could find no trace of any communication with the fugitive; that he could pump no information from the servants, nor perceive the smallest sign of anything like concealment.

Myra's letter to her aunt, dropped into the letter-box without stamp or post-mark, induced her to believe the writer had never left London; and, indeed, London was the safest labyrinth in which to hide.

Still, as the passing days mounted to weeks, and no tidings of the missing girl reached her, Mrs. Dallas grew sick with baffled hatred and defeated strategy. Her only relief was scheming how she might prove Myra in some measure insane, and acquire a legal right to her guardianship.

Her son's selfish desire to seek amusement or distraction abroad offended her deeply.

She was certainly fonder of him than of any one or anything else; still, her affection was neither as true nor as deep as her friends believed. He had failed, too, to succeed—an unpardonable offence in her keen, hard eyes. Moreover, he cost her a great deal of money, to which she greatly objected.

She was really unwell. Her nerves were strained and racked by the impotence of her will; in short, her condition quite justified her in demanding her son's return from Paris. Their meeting was not very comforting to either. Mrs. Dallas spoke her mind very forcibly, accusing Lionel of weakness, extravagance, want of principle, *maladresse*, contemptible folly, etc., to which he replied with equal force and frankness. The explosion cleared the air somewhat, when both began to see that their interests were alike, and that only in union could they find strength.

On this slightly improved frame of mind, Myra's letter came like a thunderbolt.

Mother and son were sitting at their late break-

fast. Lionel, having no office to attend, and his mother not having been able to look for another appointment for him, had a good deal of time on his hands. He lounged about all the morning, and went, she knew not where, all the afternoon and evening; for, rather to her dismay, he had money in his pocket with which she had not supplied him, and respecting which he would give no information.

The nine o'clock postman was going his rounds before they had finished their meal, and the servant brought in several letters, at which Mrs. Dallas glanced, taking up one as the servant left the room.

"Myra's writing!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas in a low voice. "The postmark is Redworth. Where is Redworth?"

"I haven't an idea! Open it, can't you, mother?"

Mrs. Dallas obeyed, while Lionel came round to lean on the back of her chair, and read over her shoulder.

"MY DEAR MRS. DALLAS," [it began]—"I have often wished to write to you fully, as I must seem very ungrateful, which I really am not. But I wanted to understand my position first, as I was not sure about it.

“For some time before I came away I felt it was impossible for me to remain dependent on your bounty, though, if you had permitted me to help myself, I might have been glad to stay with you. Above all, I was so deeply distressed at causing you and Lionel such annoyance, that I could not bear to stay under your roof.

“I ought to have told you this, and gone away openly, but I was too great a coward. I feared I knew not what, thinking you might have the power to keep me. Now that I know you have *not*, I should like to come and see you, as I am not very far away, and assure you that I can never forget all you have done for me in the last five or six months. I think I can earn my own bread here without troubling anyone. But I *do* want you to forgive me, and be friends with me. I am always puzzled about Lionel, and why he wished me to marry him when I really could not. But there will be plenty of nice girls ready enough to marry him, and he will soon forget me. I am staying with two kind ladies who keep a book-shop, and they will, I think, keep me as their assistant when the present one goes. This place is about two hours from town by the Great Northern line. I hope you will believe that I am always sincerely and gratefully yours,—MYRA DALLAS.”

Mother and son read this through in silence, and paused at the end. Then Lionel said with a sneer, “It will puzzle you to prove the writer of that letter a mad woman.”

"Who has told her that I had no power to keep her? She implies that she knew it before, but she did not! You see, she says, 'I wanted to understand my position first,' before writing to me. Someone has told her, and it is quite true."

"Still, could we not carry out that capital plan of yours about insanity?" cried Lionel. "Must we give her up? I feel as if I could clutch her in spite of all the devils in hell?"

"I don't know which are the stronger, but all the angels in heaven couldn't *give* her to you if the law was on her side," said his mother drily. "Who has been informing that sentimental idiot of her rights? I feel, I know it is Leyton! The moment I met his eyes I was conscious my enemy stood before me. He has some extraordinary interest in her. Surely there cannot be a second man as foolish as you are?"

"I do not know about that, but Leyton seemed to me hard and even elderly. Then Englishmen think so much about birth and family and——"

"In a *wife*, yes!" interrupted his mother cynically. "In other relationships birth does not matter much. Remember this, Leyton is a thorough

Bohemian, a man who cares little for conventional proprieties. I well remember the scandals about him some nine or ten years ago at Simla; he was quite young then, but——”

“Then he is by no means young now,” interrupted Lionel in his turn. “But, mother, what *is* to be done. I feel half mad. Must we always grovel on moderate means? Is that delicious, infuriating creature to be kept from me? Could we not extract some of the spoil from——”

“No, Lionel, I tell you it is madness to think of it,” cried Mrs. Dallas interrupting him hastily. “You do not understand men of his order in England; indeed, it would be dangerous to meddle with any Europeans of the same class.”

“I should fancy that one touch of necessity would make the whole world kin,” he returned. “I fancy you exaggerate an Englishman’s sense of honour.”

“Not in some directions. Well, Lionel, I am afraid there is little or no chance of again drawing Myra into our trap, she seems to have her wits about her. However, we must not quarrel. I will accept the olive branch she holds out, and watch any opportunity for drawing the broken links to-

gether; we may do well yet. But her flight is altogether inexplicable, Lionel! Could she have had the faintest inkling of our Dijon plan?" and Mrs. Dallas grew somewhat pale, and her dark brows nearly met in a frown.

"Pooh!—nonsense!—impossible! We have never mentioned the matter save with closed doors—never written a line respecting it. None—absolutely none—save ourselves can know anything of our plan. If—if only she had not started off in that astounding way, all doubt and difficulty would have been at an end *now*."

"I shall never reckon on anything again," said Mrs. Dallas. "Why did she object to you? What could she, a base-born beggar, expect? You were infinitely too good for her. But for her stupid, unappreciative obstinacy she would be your wife by this time, and all would have been well."

"It is too infernally provoking," ejaculated Lionel, throwing himself into a chair.

"It is. But, Lionel, extravagance will not mend matters; and you are extravagant. You are perpetually going about in cabs; and you don't stay out half the night without spending money."

"Well, I haven't asked you for any since I came back from Paris."

"True; but that makes me all the more uneasy. I can guess where your present petty cash comes from; and though you have won a trifle to-day, you may plunge into ruin to-morrow."

"No; I shall not. I have a system—quite my own—which ensures me success seven times out of every ten."

"I believe in no system, Lionel. If you gamble, you will die in a ditch—or the workhouse."

"Myra might have kept me from it, if you had got her for me."

"If you had got her for yourself, you mean," said his mother scornfully. "There—do not let us wrangle. Let me knit up this ravelled mesh, if I can. It will be no easy task to answer this letter of Myra's. I shall have to see Lady Shirland and Miss Browne, and give it to them. I wish, Lionel, you would call there oftener. Be sure you keep up the character of a heart-broken lover, and pour in a steady stream of noble sentiments."

"That may do with Miss Dorothea; but it is no easy matter to throw dust in her ladyship's eyes."

"Perhaps not. I see some of these American shares are falling; so you must take a note to Keating, my stockbroker. I want to see him, and he must come to me. I shall write a note to Lady Shirland, asking for a few minutes' *tête-à-tête*. She has interested herself so much about Myra's disappearance, that I am bound to give her the news at once. Bring me back an answer. Meanwhile I will write to Myra."

As Lady Shirland's reply was a pressing invitation to luncheon, Mrs. Dallas postponed her letter to Myra, in order to make a careful and elaborate toilette.

She was received with open arms by her distinguished friends.

"So you have news for us of the stray lamb," cried Lady Shirland as soon as she had said, 'How do you do?' "We will get rid of the servants as soon as we can, and have it all out."

"So sweet of you to come at once," murmured Dorothea. "I am dying to hear everything."

The butler and "Thomas" were pleased to be so soon dismissed to their own mid-day meal; and having insisted on filling her guest's glass

once more, Lady Shirland composed herself to listen.

Mrs. Dallas began by reading out Myra's letter.

"My dear, someone has put her up to all that," was Lady Shirland's comment. "It is as clear as daylight—she has kept in hiding among her *bourgeois* friends for three or four weeks—and very cleverly she has hidden herself—because she didn't know, or was not sure, of your rights. Then someone or other tells her that you have no power to keep her against her will; so she writes that letter. I must say I think her conduct is unprincipled and ungrateful to a degree. I should have nothing more to do with her if I were you."

"Redworth!" repeated Miss Browne thoughtfully. "Isn't Captain Forrester's place near Redworth?"

"Yes; I believe it is," returned Lady Shirland. "What has that to do with it?"

"I don't know, mamma; but suppose they met and made friends, or became lovers?"

"Oh—pooh! Nonsense, Dorothea. Fancy Cecil Forrester thinking of a detrimental like Myra Dallas!"

"Highly improbable!" observed Mrs. Dallas.

"But who can have told my runaway niece that she was free to go?"

"Any man who knew anything might," said Lady Shirland.

"I will tell you who did," cried Dorothea, clapping her hands together—"Jack Leyton. I met him the day before yesterday, quite early in the morning. He was in a great fuss about Myra, and said he was going to try and find her."

"I don't suppose he had far to seek," said Mrs. Dallas bitterly.

"I said the same thing to him, and he was awfully cross," returned Dorothea.

"I do not think he knew anything about it," added Lady Shirland. "I have always found Jack Leyton a truthful, honourable man. Why should he trouble about a little waif like Myra? Though I always maintain she is the making of a charming woman, she isn't one *yet*—and she has no claim on him."

"He was very persevering in his efforts to see her while she was staying with me," said Mrs. Dallas. "I must say that I distrust him. I have no doubt now that *he* is the informant who suggested Myra's

avowal of her whereabouts. But what, my dear Lady Shirland—what can have been her motive in flying from me? I can, indeed, say that I treated her as my own daughter. My poor boy was, perhaps, too ardent a lover; but at one time, I must say, she gave him every encouragement, and then, in the most inexplicable manner, turned against him. This is not the only case of changeableness I could bring against her. Indeed, at times I have doubted if her mental balance was perfect; there is such an odd strain of unreasonableness in her, as her act of leaving a happy, comfortable home proves.”

“As to that, if all the unreasonable young ladies were considered insane, our lunatic asylums would be pretty full,” said Lady Shirland drily.

“And what would you advise me to do?” asked Mrs. Dallas plaintively.

“Leave her to herself; take no notice of her letter; she doesn’t deserve anything more from you. I should go abroad and amuse myself if I were you; she seems quite ready to take her life into her own hands—let her!” said Lady Shirland positively.

"No! dear friend, I cannot do that. The poor child may not be quite accountable, I would not be harsh with her. Then I must remember how dear she is to my beloved boy! No, no, dear Lady Shirland, we must not be implacable."

"I am sure you are an angel," cried Dorothea.

"My dear Mrs. Dallas, what reason have you for sticking to that girl through good and evil report?" asked Lady Shirland with a keen look at her guest.

"I hope you do not think me incapable of doing right for right's sake," said Mrs. Dallas colouring and casting down her eyes.

"No, no! of course not! But I am a dreadful old pagan myself, and by no means addicted to doing disinterested things, and I judge others accordingly. As to your son, it is just on his account that I should keep her out of the house *if* you have any serious doubts of her sanity. However, I suppose you are the best judge of your own affairs. What do you intend to do then?"

"Well, my impulse is to write and tell her the grief and anxiety her conduct has cost me, but offer to receive her once more, allowing her to draw, or

teach, or do whatever she likes for her pocket-money; that was, I know, one of her complaints, that I did not, in addition to supplying fully every possible want, give her a sum of money to dispose of as she liked. Now that would have been impossible, Lady Shirland! Her carelessness was absolutely like that of an idiot incapable of understanding the value of anything. Her poor uncle gave her a valuable ring; she threw it about anywhere. I do not know how often I picked it up and warned her. At last it disappeared altogether."

"Well, all I can say is, you are a better woman than *I* am, and more forgiving. But as to giving you advice, it is useless, for I see you are determined to take the silly girl back," said Lady Shirland rising.

"No, not determined. I shall consider the matter carefully."

"You had better, Mrs. Dallas, and don't mind what your son says—men in love are temporarily idiots. Now, can we set you down anywhere? the carriage is at the door."

* * * * *

The walk in Wickham Woods was successful

as well as delightful. Leyton was greatly pleased with the views, and decided on a charming vista through an opening in a grove of fine beech and lime trees, with a clear, brown brook in the foreground, and a dim, blue undulating line of distant country beyond, for his "Spring Evening." How charming it was to discuss the various "points" of the subject.

Then, with some ceremony, Miss Letitia invited Mr. Leyton to join their evening meal when he escorted Myra back. And very agreeable he made himself, talking in the simplest and most unaffected manner of various places and people he had visited; though in her appreciation of his diverting anecdotes and reminiscences, Miss Letitia declared he "talked like a book."

"I am going off early to-morrow," said Leyton as he stood up to take leave. "I have various matters to settle in town; but at the end of next week I think of coming down for a while to make studies for that picture, and catch the local colour and character. As Forrester is not at home, I think I shall establish myself at The Plough; it seems clean and quiet. Then, Myra, I shall give

you some lessons, if you will come and sketch with me!"

"It will be perfectly enchanting!" cried Myra with frank pleasure.

"Mind, you must tell me what answer you have from Mrs. Dallas; and, Myra, I think you ought to write a nice note to Mr. Wardlaw—the gentleman who gave you a lift in his cab—send it to me, and I will give it to him."

"Very well; but I feel very much ashamed of having made so much ado about what was really nothing, only, you see, I did not know. But, as I said, if I had not *run* away I should never have *walked* away."

"No doubt; there are many like you, Myra. When I come back I shall discuss future plans. Good-bye."

A hearty shake of the hand, and he was gone. After a little further talk with her kind hostesses, Myra went away to rest, a new sense of hope springing up in her heart.

Yet her hopes and ambitions were lowly enough—a chance of earning her bread with friendly people, of costing no man or woman anything;

of perhaps gaining a little by her favourite art, encouraged by an occasional lesson from Jack Leyton: these were her highest visions. If only he would *not* marry Dorothea Browne! She had nearly forgotten about her, but now it all came back—all Mrs. Dallas had asserted and surmised—but it did not disturb her much. It would not happen just yet, and of course Jack knew what was best for himself; so Myra soon sank into the sweet, soft arms of downy sleep, to wake with the ineffable strength of great content.

To Leyton repose did not come quickly. The last two days had been full of excitement. The thrill of horror which had seized him when he first heard of Myra's flight; the terrible dread that, desolate, isolated as she was, she might have listened to the voice of the charmer, and taken refuge with some untrustworthy lover—kept him on the rack until he had learnt the true story from Mrs. Keene. Even then he felt as if he had neglected her by being out of the way in her moment of difficulty. "Though it would have been deucedly awkward if she had taken refuge with me. Would she ever have done so? No; not when Mrs.

Keene was within reach. There is an extraordinary instinctive tact about that poor child. Is it the result of her unerring truthfulness? Will she grow hard and shifty? Will the fair lines of her character be blurred, as delicate crayons are, by friction?" mused Leyton as he tried to sleep in vain. Well, for the present there is a breathing space. If those good old souls will give her a home and work, she will be safe and happy. But how long will it last? She does as well as many women who make a living by the brush or pencil. Forrester ought to do something for her, but—I don't want him to see too much of her. One never knows what innocent-looking corner the devil may be lurking behind; and she might take a fancy to him, though he is not attractive—at least, to me. He is not half bad, I fancy, and no fool, which I suspect I am—yes, a confounded fool, to come down here as I shall. It's awfully hard, after having drunk bitter water and eaten the flinty bread of affliction till I thought I had forgotten what sweetness was like (all my own fault, it is true, which does not mend matters), to turn away from a bit of pure, genuine sunshine and innocent

delight. After all, if there's a sting in the honey, it will hurt no one but myself, and whatever happens, I *will* drink the cup offered to me, let the dregs taste how they may. However Myra may turn out, she is infinitely fresh and real *now*. I can be of use to her, and I will be her true friend for her poor father's sake as well as her own. Ah, those eyes of hers are magnetic! How would they look with the love light in them? Well, I'll not think of *that*. What was the immediate cause of Myra's flight? Something that landlady told her—some tremendous exaggeration, no doubt; any way, it stirred Myra to gain her liberty. I wonder *why* Mrs. Dallas is so anxious to keep Myra to herself. It might be that—no—impossible—a dream"—and so he at last dropped into oblivion.

The next day but one Myra received a reply from Mrs. Dallas, which she opened with some reluctance. It was sentimental and effusive. She enlarged upon the misery she had endured, the cruelty of Myra's flight, her deep disappointment at finding she had not succeeded in attaching her poor husband's favourite niece ("I don't think he

had any other," thought Myra), and described her mental and physical sufferings in consequence. Finally, she begged Myra to return to her home, promising that she should draw, or teach, or do anything else she pleased. At all events, would she not come and spend a day with her? as she (Mrs. Dallas) was far too unwell to undertake a railway journey. No mention was made of Lionel.

Myra was dreadfully ashamed of herself when she had finished this epistle, yet not entirely converted to a belief in Mrs. Dallas and her good intentions. At all events, Leyton must read and comment on it before she would reply.

CHAPTER XXI.

LEYTON IN OFFICE.

It was nearly ten days before Leyton was free to begin his studies for the picture bespoken by Forrester. He found, to his great satisfaction, that a large number of his Egyptian sketches had been sold, the subject being the fashion, which greatly assisted his success. Altogether things looked brighter for him than they had for many a day; and with improved prospects came an unusual sense of responsibility—a wholesome touch of worldliness.

He was rather troubled than pleased by a sudden shower of invitations, very few of which he accepted. Among these few was a musical party at Lady Shirland's, where he was most graciously received. His old friend was immensely pleased by his success.

"My best congratulations," she exclaimed, when

he had struggled through the crowd to where she was reposing after the fatigues of receiving, looking stately and handsome in black velvet and diamonds. She shook hands warmly with him. "I hear of you in every direction. Now, I hope you will not throw away fortune a second time. Be business-like, and exact the last farthing of your prices. The respect paid to genius is as nothing compared to the esteem entertained for a man who looks sharply after his own interest."

"Very well, Lady Shirland, I will cultivate selfishness sedulously."

"Pray do. You know it is quite remarkable that you should have made a hit without brass or pushing. I must introduce you to Mr. Cracken-thorpe, the rich Australian. He is buying pictures and everything else he can lay his hands on. There—there he is with Dorothea." She signalled with her fan, but Miss Browne took no notice. "Oh, *he* is the last! Never mind; I shall catch him at supper-time. Now tell me, what are you going to do next?"

"I have a commission from Captain Forrester to paint a bit of his woods."

"Oh, indeed! I hope he gives a good price."

"Yes; I am quite satisfied."

"You may be, but it does not follow that it is really good; and they say he is a screw."

"He is not, I assure you, and—— Isn't that dark, dandified young fellow Ashby, the son of Mrs. Dallas?"

"Yes. He is always prowling about, seeking comfort from Dorothea and worrying about his broken heart. I wish he would try the 'Giant Cement.' Dorothea is anxious to persuade him to take a prescription of her own for agitated nerves. *A propos*, I hear you have discovered the fair fugitive. What in the world made her run away?"

"I don't expect anyone knows—not even herself—yet. There must have been some reason."

"So you are not in the secret?"

"I am not, I assure you."

"But you went off to find her?"

"Yes. I knew Miss Dallas as a child, and I was very anxious about her."

"Pooh! My dear Jack, it was utter folly—childish romance. She could have gone away

openly to her distinguished friend, the hotel-keeper, if she liked."

"How was she to know that, Lady Shirland? To so inexperienced a girl as Myra Dallas anything like authority seems potent; and to one who is so singularly destitute of friends and relations such an ally as the hotel-keeper is not to be despised. I don't suppose there is a more isolated creature in the world than my old friend's daughter."

Lady Shirland looked hard at him.

"The more fool she for quarrelling with her bread and butter; and what objection could she have to young Ashby—he is good-looking and has pleasant manners."

"Oh, heaven knows! Who can account for a girl's fancy?"

"Most of us are obliged to put our fancies as well as our pride in our pockets; and, considering her birth——"

"I trust she knows nothing of it," interrupted Leyton.

"I'm sure I don't know whether it would be better for her to know or not. Anyhow, it surprises me that Mrs. Dallas should be so anxious for

the match, however great her desire to gratify her son may be. It seems odd, doesn't it?"

"Extremely odd," returned Leyton.

"Does any solution suggest itself to you?"

"To me? No; certainly not."

"Well, I confess I am puzzled. Ah, Mr. Crackenthorpe! I have been looking for you everywhere. I want to present my friend, Mr. Leyton, to you. Mr. Leyton is the coming Titian, Claude, and Rubens all in one—one of our most rising painters. You must have seen his sketches from the Soudan?"

"Which are perfectly charming," exclaimed Dorothea, joining them. "I am so glad to see you, Mr. Leyton. What have you been doing since you returned to town? We never meet you anywhere;" and Leyton was swept away in her train.

The days, though perhaps a little long, were pleasant and bright while Myra waited for Leyton's coming and the renewal of her drawing lessons. Now that all necessity for concealment was over, Myra begged that she might assist Miss Foley in the shop, in order to fit herself for the post

she was ambitious to fill. Consent was half-reluctantly given, as neither of the "worthy principals" did seriously "incline" to believe that Miss Dallas—a young lady, a relative of such a high-born squire as Captain Forrester of Wickham Hall—could ever be really and truly their paid assistant. Indeed, much as they liked her, they would have preferred an ordinary and properly-trained "young person." They did not like to say her nay, however; so, greatly to her own content, Myra officiated for a few mornings, and did better than anyone expected. Then she made haste to finish up whatever necessary needlework she had in hand, that the days might be quite free when Leyton came to give her the dear delight of drawing under his instruction.

It was the day before that on which he was expected, and Myra was busy in the shop at that busy period of the day, after early dinner, when both boys and girls on their way to afternoon school ran in for pens and pencils and exercise-books, etc. etc.—all needed immediately.

She was in the act of serving a schoolboy, when two gentlemen came up the street at a

leisurely pace from the Wickham Woods side. As they passed the front of Miss Foley's establishment, the younger and shorter of the two exclaimed—

"By George! she's at work in earnest, Wardlaw. Look there!"

Wardlaw looked in eagerly.

"That's the interesting young lady, is it? She *has* a look of poor Fred Dallas when he was young."

"It won't do to let this sort of thing go on," returned Forrester quickly. "But it is a shame for a man to leave his daughter, be she lawful or unlawful, penniless, for another man to provide for. The Dallas family had some money, and I think that Frederic must have left something for his daughter. Here, here's the private door; we'll ring and ask for her in proper form."

They were soon admitted, and stumbling up the dark steps after Keziah, were ushered into the back parlour, which was sweet with prettily arranged flowers.

"This is a deuced nice room," exclaimed Forrester, walking over to the window and then sur-

veying the apartment, "and a good look-out. I had no idea people of this sort—shopkeepers, you know—had such swell quarters. Of course, the big London tradesmen live like fighting-cocks, but here, in this bit of a place, I didn't fancy they would have drawing-rooms—drawing-rooms any lady might sit down in, by Jove!"

"I don't think you have attended much to the progress of civilisation," returned Wardlaw drily.

"Look here!" resumed Forrester, "these two sketches on the mantelpiece are bits of Wickham. They are her work—my young relative's. Not bad, eh? You understand these things."

"Not bad at all," said Wardlaw, "and——"

The entrance of Myra cut his speech short. Both gentlemen bowed low with an instinctive feeling of respect for the fair young creature who stood before them, who looked from one to the other with an expression of surprise. Tall and thin, her figure not quite developed, she was by no means of the small-waisted, dressmaker's type; the lines of her neck and shoulders and pliant waist were more likely to please an artist's than a modiste's eye. Her generally pale cheeks were

slightly flushed, and her rich auburn brown hair, which grew rather low and somewhat in a point on her forehead, was gathered back into a loose pile on the top of her head, leaving some tiny locks to curl lovingly round the white neck at the back. Her manner was quite natural, and though a little surprised, was undisturbed. Wardlaw thought that her simple, straight, black gown, with its narrow frill of white muslin at the throat, looked as distinguished on her as many of the costly costumes he had seen from the hands of renowned milliners.

A pleased look of recognition came into her large blue eyes as they rested on Wardlaw, but she addressed both men as she advanced a step or two.

“You wished to speak to me?”

“Yes,” said Wardlaw, placing a chair for her; “both my friend and myself have a few words to say.”

“Pray sit down then”—and Myra took the seat he offered.

“I wished to make the acquaintance of the young lady who ran away with my hansom and

myself," began Wardlaw, with a kindly smile, "and to thank her for her pretty note."

"I am so pleased to have an opportunity to thank you again for your help, your goodness to me," began Myra seriously. "I have often thought of you, and hoped you would not think I was doing anything very wicked, for I am sure you thought I was running away with someone."

"Or to someone," returned Wardlaw. "I must now acknowledge my mistake, and beg many pardons. I earnestly hope you will not refuse me the pleasure of your acquaintance as a punishment for my misjudgment."

"I shall always be pleased to meet you and speak to you," said Myra simply; then she turned her eyes on Forrester, who replied to her glance by exclaiming—

"I suppose you wonder what brought *me* here. I should not have intruded if I had not something to say concerning yourself."

"Concerning *me*?"—in great surprise.

"Yes. You see, now I know your real name, I find you are a kind of relation of mine, and

I don't like your doing this sort of thing, you know."

"What sort of thing?" asked Myra, opening her eyes.

"Oh! the shop, and the selling things, and all that." Myra coloured.

"But you need know nothing about me," she said gently. "I am a stranger to you; let me remain one. I am happy, and at rest here." She sighed slightly, and something in her tone touched Wardlaw deeply.

"I don't want to be a stranger," said Forrester bluntly. "I want to be a friend and help you. It's a little difficult to begin about, though why it should be I can't say. Anyhow, your father doesn't seem to have provided for you; possibly he couldn't. Anyhow, I have a fair fortune which your father, had he lived, might have had, or some of it; so I wish to make you independent of shops and selling, so that you may draw, or paint, or do anything you like in moderation. I did not exactly know whom I ought to address on the subject, and I thought I would come to yourself. You will see I mean all right. I brought Mr. Wardlaw because

he is a great hand at business, and he is already a friend of yours; so you and he must make up your minds how much it will take to keep you fairly comfortably, and I will settle the money in some way. A life annuity is best, I think."

Myra gazed at him in great astonishment. "You are very, *very* good," she said. "But you cannot think what a quantity of money it would take. Why, I have heard Mrs. Dallas say that I cost her a hundred a year at least—she did not say it unkindly, you know."

"A hundred pounds! That is not ruinous! You and Mr. Wardlaw must settle it. Then you can study art, and make a fortune!" and Forrester laughed good-humouredly.

"Are you really rich, and can you really spare this?" asked Myra with much gravity, adding as she turned to Wardlaw for corroboration, "can he?"

"I don't think it will ruin him," returned Wardlaw.

"I assure you I should not offer what would cripple me in any way! I am not what people would call a generous fellow; but I have some idea of justice!" said Forrester.

"Then," replied Myra, "I will accept your kindness gladly. It is a great relief to know I need not be a burden to anyone, except to you, and *you* do not mind! I thank you heartily. You must take all my sketches if you think them worth accepting;" and she held out her hand to him with a sweet frankness that charmed Wardlaw. Forrester gave it a hearty shake.

"Well said! You are quite sensible and free from nonsense. Remember, though, I don't want you to stand behind the Foley counter."


"Very well. But you do not want me to go away at once?"

"Oh! as to that, do whatever you like, only do not go into the shop."

"There is one person I must consult," resumed Myra, "a friend of yours, and the only gentleman friend I possess—Mr. Leyton, and whatever he thinks best I shall do. He is coming here to-morrow, so you can speak to him."

"Coming here? I think not. He has not told me," said Forrester.

"Oh, yes! he is coming to paint a lovely bit in your woods, and he is kind enough to let me



try to paint it, too, under his directions." There was a moment's silence, both men making their own comments on this frank avowal; then Forrester exclaimed—

"I say, Miss Dallas, I wish you would tell us *why* you ran away from your aunt?"

"I was not happy, I wanted to work for myself," returned Myra colouring vividly. "But do not think my aunt was unkind: she tried to make me as happy as possible, but—I would rather not speak about it. I think I was foolish."

"Oh, all right! You *were* rather foolish, but I will say no more."

"My friend Forrester has a fine English bluntness," said Wardlaw.

"It is well to be honest," returned Myra looking at Forrester with a sort of indulgent smile, which nettled him a little.

"I have always thought so," he said stoutly. "Now I shall leave Wardlaw with you to discuss matters."

"I do not want to discuss anything!" said Myra earnestly.

"Perhaps Miss Dallas would prefer nominating Leyton her representative," observed Wardlaw. "He

and I can arrange matters between the high contracting parties."

"Yes, thank you! I should much prefer it," cried Myra.

"Then we need not occupy your time any longer," said Wardlaw.

"And will you tell Leyton," said Forrester, "that I am awfully sorry he did not let me know he meant to come down now, or I should not have made any other engagement. As it is, I am going back to town the day after to-morrow. Pray tell him, also, that the Hall is quite at his service, if he would like to put up there."

"Certainly, I will give him your message."

"Then we will wish you good-morning," said Forrester rising.

"I shall only say, *Auf Wiedersehen*," added Wardlaw, shaking hands with her.

"Oh, yes! I do hope I shall see you again," exclaimed Myra cordially; then giving her hand to Forrester, "Good-bye," she said, "and thank you heartily for your great kindness."

"All right," said Forrester with a friendly nod. "Don't let that aunt of yours bamboozle you into

going back to her. You'll be better and happier on your own hook ;" with which elegant valediction he left the room.

"Ask Leyton to come up and have a talk, in case you see him first to-morrow," were Wardlaw's last words as he hastened after Forrester, and they retraced their steps towards the Hall.

"Well," asked the latter, "isn't she a nice, sensible little thing?"

"She is; but not little—she is nearly as tall as yourself."

"Perhaps. Then she is so young—so almost childish—one thinks of her as little."

"Simple enough, if you like, and truthful, I think; but not childish. She is certainly like her father when I saw him last—nearly twenty years ago."

"Was he in Munich then?"

"No. At that time he had been living in London. I fancy he was arranging his affairs, which were somewhat tangled, I have heard."

"It was a shame to leave that girl unprovided for. I suppose she knows nothing of her mother's history?"

"I hope not," returned Wardlaw. "There is

no necessity for such painful knowledge. I wonder Colonel Dallas did not settle something on her. He was as good a fellow as ever lived. I knew him very well. He told me about his brother's death, and greatly regretted the sort of estrangement which existed between them. It seems that Dallas wrote to his brother begging him to break off with this girl's mother, and Frederic replied angrily; so the correspondence ceased. That was the reason Colonel Dallas took Munich on his way home, hoping to effect a reconciliation. The brothers used to be much attached until this unfortunate affair of——"

"Ay," interrupted Forrester, "that's always the way when women get mixed up in anything. They are the devil's own for making mischief. For a long time ours was a bachelor corps—only the doctor and adjutant were married. Then the old colonel was nabbed, and a married captain exchanged in; and so on, till the whole corps went to the dogs."

"You're an awful heathen, Forrester; but I am glad you are going to do the right thing. Your bark is worse than your bite."

"May-be so. I say, Wardlaw, you know Leyton pretty well—is he 'straight-going' all round?"

"Yes; I should say particularly straight. But——"

"Ah! there are always 'buts' in some directions. Yes; I am glad to be of use to this left-hand relative of mine; but, mind you, Wardlaw, I'm not going to settle a fortune on her—a sufficiency according to her position is all she can expect. I am no Don Quixote."

"No one ever accused you of resembling the renowned knight."

"Ah, well, one must think of self in this world. I'll send a line to Leyton reminding him of his promise to stay at the Hall. He will get it before he leaves town to-morrow. What a curious affair it is!"

When left alone, Myra sat down to think, with a curious, dazed sensation of being in a dream-haunted sleep. Her chief puzzle was how this curt, resolute, well-dressed, and certainly distinguished-looking young man came to be her cousin. Her ideas of social life—of relations, con-

nections, and all the complicated articulation of family ties—were very crude. She was brought up within the borders of social Bohemia—a very gentle, innocent Bohemia, where the only aristocracy was that of genius. Of finery she knew nothing—of refinement a great deal; for vulgarity jarred upon her as something intolerable. She knew not why. Her dear, good Mrs. Keene was by no means highly polished, yet she never offended; while Wilhelmina not unfrequently made her feel unwell. The buoyancy and brightness of her youth had been perpetually overshadowed by a sense of loneliness—a dim feeling, which she could not define, that she was not like other girls, and that, somehow or other, her strange isolation was by no means counted to her for righteousness; that when her schoolfellows went away to parents and guardians and relatives, it was not altogether to her credit that *she* was left to spend her holidays at school.

On the whole, her ignorance of life—English life especially—saved her from many painful surmises; still, there was a deep strain of sad resignation running through the current of her

life. Fortunately for Myra, she had no personal ambition. Music was dear to her for its inspiring harmony ; drawing was even dearer, because of a certain inexpressible delight in reproducing on paper or canvas the effects which charmed her eye, and she forgot herself in both. She was slightly indolent by nature ; but this was corrected by an inherent independence, which made it almost impossible for her to ask help—money help—from anyone.

Forrester's offer, therefore, was doubly welcome after her terrible experience of penniless dependence while with Mrs. Dallas. To have enough wherewith to provide for her small daily needs, and to buy herself pretty clothes, which need not be costly, filled her soul with tranquil pleasure. To be independent, and free to study the art she loved, was almost like heaven. What a piece of news to tell Jack, who was always her dear, good, true friend ; to whom *she* could give nothing, but who was ready to do everything for her, and to trouble himself about an insignificant stumbler on the path to art like herself. Much as she liked the kindly sisters—her hostesses—

she would not say a word to them till she had first told everything to Jack; so when Miss Foley said to her at tea that evening, "You had some distinguished visitors to-day, missee, my dear?" Myra said, "Yes, indeed. I shall tell you all about them to-morrow. They are very nice and kind, and Captain Forrester says he is a cousin of mine."

"Indeed!" cried Miss Foley with a very large note of admiration. "It is a pity there is not a lady up at the Hall, then he might ask you to go and stay there!"

"Oh! I don't think he would do that," said Myra laughing, "though I *should* like to stay at a real English country house."

If Myra was humility itself in some directions, she had not the slightest dread of those who, according to the social scale, were her superiors; a lady was a lady, a gentleman was a gentleman, and no more to her.

Next morning broke dull, soft, and drizzling, to Myra's great disgust. She had arranged in her own mind that Leyton was to arrive somewhere about early dinner-time, and that then they might

go into the woods together, and make a final decision as to where they should take their stand, and if Myra was to attempt the sketch in water-colours as she wished. Miss Foley, however, assured her that rain was greatly wanted for the country, and that probably to-morrow would be beautifully fine.

Myra had retired to her room after breakfast, to put the last touches to a bonnet she was making for her especial ally, Miss Letitia; she was anxious to get it out of the way before she began lessons with Jack, when she was startled by Keziah, who came with a smile on her rather wooden face to say that "Muster Leyton was asking for 'ee." A hasty brushing off of threads and scraps, an equally hasty smoothing over of her hair and casting aside of her apron, and Myra ran down to greet her friend. "How good of you to come so soon!" she cried giving him her hand, "I did not expect you till two o'clock."

"I intended to be still earlier," said Leyton, who looked somewhat grave and even annoyed, "but I could not get off."

"There is something the matter with you, Jack! you do not look pleased?"

"Well, I am not, Myra," he returned smiling. "I was in hopes that Forrester was off somewhere. Now he writes to me to lunch with him and stay there, and I don't know what. Now I just wanted to be free, and on my own hook—not to have him worrying after me."

"Oh, don't mind that!" cried Myra. "I have a great piece of news for you, and when you hear it you will be glad to see him anywhere; he has been so good to me!"

"Indeed!" said Leyton in a surprised, almost alarmed tone, looking earnestly into the blue eyes upraised to his own.

"Yes, he *is* good! though he is so odd and blunt. He came here yesterday with—who do you think?—the very same gentleman who let me drive with him in his cab the day I escaped—Mr. Wardlaw. I was so glad to see him; and after a few words, Captain Forrester told me he had found I was related to him, and that, somehow, part of his money ought to have been my father's; so he is going to give me an—annuity I think he called it. I don't know how much, but I think a hundred a year, because——"

"A hundred a year!" repeated Leyton; "I hope a little more than that."

"It is a great deal, Jack! At first I was rather startled and shy about taking it, but both of them assured me that Captain Forrester had plenty of money, and that I, somehow, had a right to it; so I was very pleased and said, 'Thank you!'"

"I am very glad of this!" said Leyton drawing a chair beside her as she sat down on a settee in the window. "Forrester has done the right thing, I trust he will carry it out, and settle a fair amount on you legally."

"Yes, I believe he will; and I think what he wants to talk to you about is this business. It is too bad to trouble you when you have plenty to do for yourself, but Mr. Wardlaw seemed inclined to make you a sort of guardian to me."

"Well, Myra, are you disposed to accept me as your guardian?"

"Yes, of course I am, and very thankful to have you!" cried Myra with a happy laugh, stretching out her hand to him and giving him a frank, friendly pressure. "Isn't this great news? Now I shall be able to study, and I may be able to

earn some money by drawing and painting, besides the joy of doing it."

"I have no doubt of it, Myra. I am delighted to go to the Hall on such an errand; but Forrester must shell out more than a hundred a year!"

"I could never *ask* for anything more."

"No! but I could," returned Jack. "Your cousin is in Wardlaw's hands, and he will make him do the right thing; at any rate, we could not do much on a day like this, so I will get business matters over, and to-morrow we will start fair. By the way, I think my picture must be a 'Summer' not a 'Spring' Evening, for we are already in June. I had a visit from your friend, Mrs. Dwyer, the other day. She brought me your pictures to take care of, but her object really was to tell me her ideas respecting young Ashby and his mother's schemes. We shall never be able to prove if she is right or not; she is inclined to colour things; but if what she says is correct, I should like to give both mother and son the lash! You must have had an awful fright, my poor child!"

"I was *awfully* terrified! and *you* frighten me

now. You look so angry, Jack! You must never be cross to me!"

Leyton laughed. "Do you think I should be, Myra?" taking her hand in both his own.

"Yes, if you thought I deserved it."

"Ay! I might be very, very angry under some circumstances; but, meantime, we are fast friends! Now I must be off. Prepare for my first appearance as a severe, square-toed guardian."

CHAPTER XXII.

THROUGH THE WOODS.

LEYTON'S interview with Forrester and his ex-guardian was, on the whole, satisfactory.

He was welcomed cordially, and found, first, that Forrester was going away on a cruise with some friends to Norway, and Wardlaw was returning that evening to town; secondly, that Forrester was more disposed to be just than generous. Nevertheless, he obtained a sufficient allowance to set Myra free—if she were careful—for study, to acquire the means of increasing her income. Both men were anxious that Leyton should act as Myra's friend and guardian. He hesitated; he scarce knew why. But, casting a mental glance round, he could think of no other possible person to fill this office. He therefore assented; whereupon Wardlaw remarked that he was glad of it, as he (Leyton) was well suited

to act as her adviser in all matters connected with the art for which she seemed to have a decided taste.

"Quite decided, by Jove!" added Forrester. "I was a good deal struck with her work. She wanted to give me her drawings at once—very proper spirit on her part—but, of course, I will pay whatever you think they are worth, Leyton."

"You had better let her give them to you," returned Leyton. "You may pay for any others; but, just at the beginning, it will gratify her. You have really done her a great service, and she is naturally anxious to show her appreciation of it."

"Well, if you are so sentimental—both of you—let it be as Miss Dallas wishes. But, Leyton, I would rather she were out of this. You see, it would be awkward her living on with these old book-selling women. Her connection with me would leak out, and it wouldn't sound well."

"All right. But she may as well stay until I find quarters for her in Paris; for I think she had better study in Paris. Indeed, wherever she

goes I shall have to look for some place for her; but Lady Shirland will help me."

"I suppose she has no friend who would take her in, even for a consideration?" asked Wardlaw.

"No one but a capital woman who knew her mother and would do anything for her; but, as she keeps a sort of hotel, that would not do. Myra Dallas is quite a gentlewoman."

"Ah, well, I've no doubt you will do the right thing," said Forrester. "As she has a little income now, I daresay some curate or doctor will marry her; and she will go on all right. I'll see my man Grove the day after to-morrow, and give him instructions to prepare a deed of settlement at once. I am very glad to be of use to my young relative, as I am quite willing to consider her. Now, Leyton, if you can find a respectable husband for her, we shall both have done our duty like men."

Leyton laughed—a somewhat forced laugh—and then changed the subject.

Forrester pressed him to remain to dinner after taking a turn round the home farm; but

Leyton refused. Wardlaw, who was going to call upon a neighbouring family—acquaintances of his in London—offered to walk back to Redworth with him; so Leyton, having reiterated his thanks on behalf of Myra, took leave of Forrester; and for some little way he and Wardlaw paced on in silence, till some observation of the latter on the congenial topic of “birds” and the prospect of sport in the coming season started a lively conversation. At length even this topic was exhausted, and a pause ensued, which Wardlaw suddenly broke by exclaiming—

“I wonder what her little game was?”

“Whose?” asked Leyton.

“The widow’s—Mrs. Dallas’s.”

“You mean her wish to keep Myra in her hands? Yes; it is rather puzzling.”

“What made the girl run away?”

“I fancy young Ashby’s attentions were rather too pressing.”

“Yet he is a good-looking, smooth-tongued young fellow. Many girls would have been charmed with him.”

“Perhaps. There is no accounting for taste.”

"Still, there is the extraordinary fact that Mrs. Dallas—a shrewd, worldly woman—should be more than willing to let her son marry the illegitimate, penniless daughter of a poor painter. I wonder what can be the secret spring of her conduct?"

"That I cannot tell; but there *is* something under it all."

"I suppose all poor Fred's papers fell into his brother's hands?"

"No doubt; and what little property he had, too. Of course, as he died without a will, his daughter had no claim, and all went to Mrs. Dallas."

"What an infamous shame! Well, I am thankful that Forrester has done the right thing. That poor girl is tolerably safe now," said Wardlaw. "Forrester is a curious fellow—very hard, but not half bad. I am glad he has taken a fancy to Miss Dallas after his fashion. I wonder what circulates in his veins."

"Not blood, I should say," returned Leyton. "It's better for him, perhaps. When that kind of circulating medium^{*} catches fire there is generally a big blaze."

"Well, I am pretty sure, whatever *his* circulating medium may be, it will never ignite."

"I should not be too sure," said Leyton.

Wardlaw glanced at him, and after a moment's pause he observed, "My road turns off here, so I must wish you good-bye. My best compliments to Miss Dallas. It is rather a cold message to a young lady who eloped with me; but, I assure you I am not the less her devoted servant, if I can be of any use to her. I must say I should not mind having a daughter like her to look after me as I fall deeper into the sere and yellow."

"Yes, if she *would* look after you! But it's hard to say what a woman might do."

"Or a man either, for that matter. Besides, there are women *and* women. I've travelled further on the road of life than you, though you have seen a good bit, too."

"The distance is nothing, it's the pace that kills," returned Leyton smiling.

They shook hands and parted. Leyton pressed on with a swinging step; he was eager to tell Myra the result of his interview: he was glad to think that the Hall would be shut up during his stay.

What a curious freak of fortune it was that made him, in a way, Myra's guardian; for he could not refuse to accept the office thrust upon him, she having no other man friend in the world. It was but for a short time she would need his services; in another year she would be of age, and her own mistress, if by that time she had not married "some doctor or curate."

After all, there were not many men who were calculated to make Myra happy. She was so delicate, so unworldly, and had been so unfortunate. Happily for herself, she appeared to have little or no passion, plenty of tenderness, but—— "I have no right to judge anyone's character though; least of all a woman's," said Leyton to himself, interrupting the course of his thoughts. "Myra may have mental depths I have not explored."

On reaching "Foley's Library," Leyton found Myra writing busily.

"What a long time you have been away!" she exclaimed, rising to greet him, "yet you have not really been long."

"Now I must give you an account of my mission," he returned. "On the whole things have

gone much as I wished." Myra resumed her seat, and Leyton drawing a chair opposite her, repeated most of what had passed during his interview with Forrester and Wardlaw. "You see, then," he concluded, "you will be able (with economy) to live and study, if you wish to study your art. We must arrange some plan of life, for you cannot remain here. But I don't want you to plunge into any other work but sketching with me at present; I am selfish enough to try and secure your company, if I can, while I am here," concluded Leyton with one of his rare, sweet smiles.

"Do you care to have me with you?" said Myra resting her elbow on the table and her head on her hand, while she looked at him calmly and thoughtfully. "It *is* good to hear you say that, to know that I do not trouble you. I will never trouble you if I can help it, so I hope we shall always agree."

"That means that you do not undertake to give up your will and judgment altogether to your guardian?" asked Leyton, amused by her reservation.

"No, dear Jack, I do not! We might disagree

about some matter of right or wrong, and there I should not let another think for me! But it is not likely that we shall differ. I am going to dare to be happy now. I can hardly believe that I shall not have to depend on anyone again; that I shall always have a penny for a stamp, and two-and-sixpence for a pair of gloves! You cannot think how dreadful it was all those months with Mrs. Dallas, never to have a farthing of one's own! Oh! I cannot bear to think of it." She shuddered visibly.

"What was it you disliked so much, besides your impecuniosity?" asked Leyton looking keenly into her eyes. "Was that young cub troublesome?"

"Yes!" returned Myra, growing a little paler. "I suppose it was weak and foolish of me, but after I went to live with Mrs. Dallas, the feeling of being in the room with him made me faint and ill, and his eyes frightened me. Then I wanted to like him; I tried, I saw it would please my aunt; and I knew that all these weary years I was miserable because I had no one to love me as my dear father did. And now, when Lionel was ready to love me, I

felt only horror! It was ungrateful, too; but—it is over.”

“It was curious, certainly,” said Leyton looking down thoughtfully, with an instinctive desire to hide the expression he knew was in his eyes. “All you have to do now is to forget all unpleasant things, and grow well and strong; for you look by no means robust, my dear ward.”

“Oh! I shall soon be a giant of strength.”

“And who are you writing to now?”

“To Mrs. Keene. She will be so glad to hear my good news. If you could only have seen the joy of Miss Foley and Miss Letitia when I told them the great news, you would have been amused and pleased. Now I want to write to Mrs. Dallas.”

“Must you write to Mrs. Dallas?”

“Yes; I ought. I never had any quarrel with her. She always treated me well; and I behaved badly—everyone would consider it acting badly.”

“Well, perhaps you had better.”

Myra folded up her letter and put it into an envelope.

“I must pay Mrs. Keene five pounds she gave

me, then perhaps it may be in time to prevent her selling the ring."

"What ring?"

Myra gave him the history.

"How good Captain Forrester has been to me! I *do* like him."

"He is rather a rough customer," said Leyton.

"I do not find him rough. He is sympathetic to me."

"I believe you are the first person who ever thought him so," returned Leyton a little gruffly. "Now I will leave you to finish your letters. If the evening is fine, may I come and take you for a stroll? I think the sun is struggling to show himself."

"Oh, yes, do. It will be delightful. And will you come back and have a cup of tea with my good friends?"

"To be sure. I shall quite enjoy it."

* * * * *

It would be difficult in so many words to convey the quiet happiness of the ensuing week or two—the thorough companionship; the complete

comprehension daily developing between master and pupil; the long afternoons of work, sprinkled with discussions and sympathetic talk.

The extraordinary confidence with which Myra told every thought of her heart, every little event of her simple life, to Leyton, was unchequered, untinged with the smallest suspicion that he could be a lover. He was her father's friend, her own and only old friend; and in his faithful friendship she believed much more intensely than she did in heaven—one was so near, the other so far and so indefinite. The clear and healthy soul thus laid bare to him interested Leyton beyond all he had ever known or studied. In contemplating it he almost forgot the soft grace, the great, lustrous, appealing eyes, the sensitive mouth, whose effect upon his senses he once half feared.

He tried hard and honestly to keep up a composed and even indifferent tone in his intercourse with his pupil. It was ^{so} such folly to lose his hold of himself a second time; besides, it would be stupid of a struggling man to dream of marrying, and it would be shameful to mislead so defenceless a creature as Myra. Though she was utterly un-

touched by any feeling save gratitude and regard, perhaps, if he melted into the lover, she would shrink from him as she did from young Ashby. Well, no; not quite in the same way. But if, as was quite probable, he were not acceptable to her, their charming friendship would be at an end. No; of course it would never do to give in to such weakness. He was strong enough to guard both, and might enjoy the sweet dewy tenderness of this restful passage in his hitherto rugged way.

Meantime the days were all too short, the nights too terribly long; the separation, when the afternoon and evening's work was over—for he wanted sunset effects—infinately irritating. Sometimes, indeed—only when invited—he would go in to tea—high tea—and Myra would play old German airs to him on a weakly little piano, which had once been the pride of Miss Foley's sitting-room, and was at least in tune. How they transported him back to the pains and pleasures of his Munich existence, when Myra was quite a little girl—the cherished darling of a happy home, a pretty, inoffensive toy to himself—and now she was gradually absorbing

him, though passion had not yet crept into the quick currents of his blood ! She was interesting, too, as a pupil. She caught his ideas quickly, and improved greatly under his instruction. She had artistic feeling, and sometimes made suggestions respecting his own work which he did not disdain to accept. Yes ; they were halcyon days.

To Myra they were too heavenly sweet. She only feared, poor child, warned by sad experience, that it would not, could not last. Yet she did not let this innate conviction trouble her enjoyment—such gleams of sunshine were too rare, too precious not to be grasped anyhow. Perhaps her pleasure was more complete because it was more tranquil.

Myra was singularly free from selfishness in every form. She did not want to be more beautiful, more gifted, more exalted than her fellows. She was so little occupied with self that she never stopped to regret that she was plain or dull or insignificant. She did not know whether she was or was not. Thus she was free to enjoy everything outside self without drawbacks. All she asked was to be loved ; the only boon she craved was home

life, neither of which it had, so far, been her lot to find. She was glad to please, and quick to resent unkindness where it was meant, which she had the sense to see was rarely. It was this resentment which nerved her to meet Mrs. Dallas's harshness in the first years of her London life with an amount of courage, even defiance, which embittered that lady against her.

This freedom from self-consciousness is a shield to the girl so gifted. She does not see in every man she meets a possible or probable lover, and so does not lose her head, nor the freedom of unembarrassed manner, and the power of frank expression, until the real ruler of her destinies appears; and even then not until some accident reveals that he is not quite "as other men are" to her.

This it was that made Myra so tranquilly, healthfully happy in Leyton's presence. He was a dear, delightful comrade, of whose superior knowledge, judgment, experience, ability she had the highest opinion, yet whose superiority did not crush her; she could speak out her own small thoughts, and dreams, and wishes without reserve. His somewhat matter-of-fact, brusque manner helped to keep

the idea of love at a distance, and preserve the heavenly peace of this blissful interval.

The setting of the scene, too, was full of charm. The lanes were sweet with abundant hawthorn, wild roses beautified the hedge-rows; the paths through Wickham Woods were gay with groups of fiery lychris, and patches of woodruff lay at the feet of old trees. The woods had reached their loveliest stage; wide-spreading beech and blossoming chestnut, noble oak-trees and grand old elms, upheld a firmament of transparent green. The midday sun sent his golden radiance through the lovely leaves, or sprinkled the soft, mossy grass beneath with drops of light, as the gentle air opened a passage for them.

The woods were perfect at this merging of May into June. From the deep shadows of "the swaying greenness" the coo of the ringdove came with a sleepy tenderness ineffably soothing, and where the open glades permitted a wider view, or as sundown approached, strips of the sky were visible, barred with crimson and violet, gold and pale lilac.

The point selected by Leyton for his picture was a bend in the trout stream which ran through Wickham Woods, where it was crossed by an old grey stone

bridge, lichen-grown, its crevices defined with little ferns; and through the high arch was a delightful peep at the opposite bank, with its tangle of greenery dipping into the brown water. Following the stream was the widest opening in the woods. The ground rose steeply at the further side, showing every variety of foliage, and the glade, still widening out and sloping downwards, permitted a glimpse of the blue distance beyond. On this scene shone the western sun, in which the tender softness of spring light still lingered.

Leyton had never enjoyed any work so much. His senses seemed unusually clear, his perception of colour, beauty, proportion, abnormally vivid; certainly, he had rarely painted so well.

The light was changing, and Leyton paused, and stood back to contemplate the effect of his labours. "I think that will do," he said, "at least for to-day. You have brought me luck, Myra! I have seldom been so much 'i' the vein.' Let me see how you have got on. Hum, ah! not so bad! Your sky might be more diaphanous, but you'll manage with practice. You have not done much?"

"No! I have been watching you. This will

be lovely, Jack; even better than an 'Autumn Morning,' " coming up to gaze at his picture.

"Yes! It's pretty good! but, after all, what a poor travesty of the glories of Nature one's best endeavour is! It is heavenly here." They stood silently side by side for a moment or two enjoying the tranquil beauty around them. The birds were now mostly silent, but a stray unmated blackbird poured forth occasionally his mellow notes, and the blackcap, flitting here and there among the underwood, uttered his rich sweet song.

"Come," said Leyton with a quick sigh, "let us shut up shop! We will leave our belongings at the keeper's lodge; and if you are up to a tolerably long walk, say about two miles and a-half, I can take you a lovely round through the other side of the woods, and past the house, back to the town."

"Oh, I am quite ready, Jack. I can walk further than that."

"Can you? You don't look like it."

"One can always do what is pleasant."

"You are a philosopher, Myra!"

"Thank you! I did not know I was anything

so fine," she returned, putting up her materials, which Leyton carried with his own. The sun was beginning to sink when they started homewards, and for some little way they walked in sympathetic silence.

"Your picture is nearly finished?" asked Myra at last.

"I want another day or two at it here; then I can finish in the studio as far as it *can* be finished."

"Shall you go away then?"

"Oh, I don't know. There are some other delightful bits further up the stream; then I want to give you a few lessons in trees."

"Thank you, dear Jack; but you must not waste your time on me."

"If it is wasted? Nothing is wasted that gives pleasure."

Myra laughed—a happy laugh.

"I am uncommonly happy down here," added Leyton.

"So am I," returned Myra cordially; "but it will not do for you to stay here—you must be in London."

"I don't care for London. It is such a crush of struggling, selfish, swindling, competitive money-grubbers, that an honest fellow has scarcely a chance."

"That is a dreadful description. I always think that everything would go to pieces if the good people did not outnumber the bad."

"I don't think your own experience can incline you to believe that doctrine, Myra?"

"Yes, it does. I have not met unkindness, except at first from Mrs. Dallas, who really seemed to dislike me then. What chilled me has been indifference. Though some of my school-fellows were kind—they were even really fond of me—still, it was too dreadful at first. I used to wish I could die. If I were not so cowardly, I should have tried to kill myself. It was awfully strange to belong to *no one*; for Mrs. Dallas treated me so coldly, I felt as if I had no business to live. Night after night I have cried myself to sleep, my very soul aching for the clasp of my father's arms; then to wake and know that I should never, never feel them again." Her voice broke.

"It was too cruel," murmured Leyton.

"But I will not think of that miserable time here in this lovely sunlight and with *you!*" she exclaimed.

"No; try to look forward. Your worst days are over, Myra," said Leyton, drawing closer to her. "And I—I cannot stand the idea of your misery. Let us talk of something else. We must look out nice quarters for you in Paris. If my friend Marcy and Madame his wife could take you in, it would be capital, and you would get on splendidly."

"I shall be terribly lonely, though; but that cannot be helped," added Myra.

"You will find troops of—well, say pleasant acquaintances—friends are always rare. Life lies before you, Myra; hitherto you have not lived."

"Ah, that is true; and I feel as if I could never emerge from the shadow that has been laid upon me. However, it is ungrateful to be downcast. I intend to be brave and active."

There was another silence. Myra looked down in thought. The emotion which stirred her gave colour to her delicate cheek and a tremor to her

soft lips; while her long dark lashes hid the eyes which Leyton felt were full of tears.

He was seized with an almost irresistible longing to take her in his arms, and tell her that so long as he had life she should never know another lonely, homeless hour. He pictured to himself the light that would come into her eyes, the heavenly sweetness of the smile that would part her lips. But he knew that as yet her heart had not spoken, that he was but a dear and valued friend; for Leyton was no self-adoring egoist. But he also knew that a word—a touch—might rend the veil which had hitherto hidden from Myra the knowledge that she was a charming woman, capable of giving and attracting that supreme love which is the crown of life. Something in her truthful simplicity, in the strength of her pathetic resignation, appealed to the chivalry, the profound tenderness of his nature. It would be almost blasphemous to “make love,” in the ordinary sense of that expression, to so young, so inexperienced a creature. What was he, that he should expect to win the love of a fresh, unexplored spirit? And what had he to offer, save the ashes of his life? Indeed,

there was something almost paternal in the protecting affection she had evoked in him ; and yet he was half afraid of the smouldering fire within, which might burst into flame at any moment. He knew it was there, however he forced himself to disregard it, though despising himself for his contemptible weakness in permitting "the Sturm und Drang" of passion once more to disorganise his existence. He was restored to calmer thought by Myra's quiet voice.

"How sweet the air is—so fresh and full of the odour of earth and grass ! But it is a long way round."

"It seems long because it is unknown. We shall soon pass the front of the house. Are you tired ?"

"Oh, no ; not at all. I can walk much further."

Another pause, broken by Myra.

"Did you see Lady Shirland while you were in town ?"

"Yes ; and she was asking about you."

"I am afraid she thinks me ungrateful and bad for leaving my aunt as I did.'

"She thinks there is something in it she cannot make out. Young Ashby, who seems quite an *habitué* of the house, has not, I daresay, given a very favourable account of you."

"I suppose not, and I am sorry. I like Lady Shirland. How much she must have seen to be so wise, so assured about everything, to be so often right, too, as one feels she is."

"Yes, and what a contrast to that extraordinary puppet, her step-daughter! she must be a terrible infliction to a sensible woman like Lady Shirland."

Myra turned her eyes full on Leyton's, and laughed as if much amused. "I am sure you are very honest, Jack, or you would not have made that speech if what Mrs. Dallas said was true."

"And, what did she say?" asked Leyton faintly interested.

"She said that Miss Dorothea Browne was going to marry you."

"Such might have been her intention, but she would be obliged to get my consent first. Do you mean to say, Myra, that you ever believed this hideous nonsense?"

"I think I did."

"Thank you! I should have thought you knew your guardian better."

"How could I tell? I know so little. I have seen so little. Miss Browne looks rather pretty in her bonnet and veil; she wears lovely clothes, and she is very rich."

"Three excellent reasons! I am flattered by your high opinion; and, pray, what was your own view of the proposed alliance?"

"I did not like it at all. I never could feel quite comfortable with Miss Browne, though she meant to be very kind. If she were your wife, you might grow like her, and, any way, I should lose you, Jack. I could not tell you things; you would tell her."

"You have a poor opinion of my individuality. I assure you I would not lose my pupil for twenty, nay, twenty times twenty Dorothéas!"

"How good it is to hear you say so!" returned Myra earnestly, softly, as if to herself.

"So you must be a very diligent student, to confirm my opinion of you, Myra."

"I will, indeed, work with all my soul and with all my strength," said Myra with almost religious fervour; "and I think I shall be able to do one or two things, nothing grand, you know, but something true."

"I think you will accomplish a good deal."

"But I wish, Jack, you would not send me away to Paris! I should never see *you*, and I am accustomed to London."

"My dear Myra, you are a free agent; I only advise; believe me, you would like Paris."

"I might; but I should like to stay with Mrs. Keene."

"We will settle all about that later, when *your* money matters are settled. Here! this is not an easy stile; once over, we are close to the grounds. You are not tired?"

"No! not in the least!"

"All right!" He climbed the rude crossway bars, which were more impediments than aids, and jumping down at the other side, stood ready to assist his companion. Myra followed him with surprising ease for a town-bred girl; but, descending,

the heel of her boot caught on a rail, and she would have had a nasty fall had not Leyton caught her.

It was a crucial moment, and involuntarily, though most consciously, his arms closed round her, holding her for an unnecessary moment or two pressed against his breast. Nor did Myra resist, she looked up to him with an expression of serenest happiness.

"You are not hurt, dear?" he asked anxiously, tenderly, and slowly relaxing his hold.

"Oh, no! You kept me from all harm!"

"And I always will, Myra, if—if I can. You are sure you are all right?"

The rest of the way Leyton was very silent, and Myra did almost all the talking.

On reaching home, he went indoors with his ward; he felt unusually loth to leave her.

"Why, there are two letters for *me*," she exclaimed as they entered the sitting-room; she opened them quickly, handing the first to Leyton. "This is all about money from someone who signs himself W. and J. Groves; and *this*—this is from Mrs. Dallas. She wants me to go and spend the

day with her to-morrow. I scarcely like to go, yet I cannot refuse."

"Well, Myra, here is your first cheque," said Leyton, "and a receipt for your signature. Forrester has been prompt in settling your affairs. As to Mrs. Dallas, perhaps you *had* better go, and have done with it.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. DALLAS SCORES.

WHEN Myra woke next morning she felt once again as she used to feel in her dear old home, when Hedwig called her at cock-crow—the sense that life was sweet and the world very good. She had fallen asleep quickly, pleasantly overcome by the fatigue of a long day in the open air and an unusual amount of exercise. Her first waking thoughts were supremely happy.

Jack was really fond of her for her own sake; he was not merely kind from compassion, from any sense of old friendship with her father; he was really fearful of harm happening to her; he had been startled because she had narrowly escaped a bad fall—so startled that his heart beat strong enough for her to feel it as she lay for a moment against him. How sweet it was to feel for that moment the heavenly security of his embrace!

Whether it was right or proper to feel this did not trouble Myra. No doubt upon the subject crossed her mind. She only knew that she was happy; that Jack Leyton really liked to have her with him; that he never thought of marrying Dorothea—that funny, fanciful little doll. But he might—he probably would—marry somebody else; and then—— How could she bear to lose him, for things could never be the same again? How could she live without seeing him and telling him everything? Then Myra knew she loved him as heroines love in novels, and as she never could love Lionel Ashby.

This sudden conviction did not disturb her very much. She would, of course, let no one else know, least of all Jack. But there would be some happiness in being his dear friend; in doing him credit as his pupil; and for the rest she would enjoy the present, after her long fast from all that was sweet and bright and satisfying.

There is a marvellous concentration in profound feeling, be it joy or sorrow. To the sorrowing or the enraptured it seems that the moment will never pass away.

Myra had hardly breakfasted when Leyton appeared.

"I came to make sure of your being in time," he said. "Punctuality is not the virtue of young ladies."

"I have only to put on my hat, and I shall be quite ready, Jack."

Myra met his eyes steadily enough, but the soft colour mounting in her cheeks made Leyton feel uneasy.

"I telegraphed to Mrs. Keene to meet you. You cannot know your way about in that neighbourhood."

"Oh, why did you? It will give her so much trouble; and I am quite accustomed to take care of myself."

"I know that," said Leyton shortly; "but I don't like it. I should go up to town with you myself, only——"

"And lose this beautiful day, Jack!" she interrupted. "Don't think of it."

"You will like to see Mrs. Keene?"

"I shall be delighted."

"Well, I have changed your cheque for you;

and there is some of the money—not all. I will keep the rest for you. Take care you do not get your pocket picked.”

“Oh, thank you. I don’t think I ever had so much money before. Ought I not to write to Captain Forrester, thanking him for this?”

“I will do it for you.”

“Oh, no; I should prefer writing myself.”

“Very well,” returned Leyton abruptly.

Having bought her a picture-paper, put her into a corner place, commended her to the care of the guard, and told her the train by which she must return, he stood gazing after the train till it disappeared, and turned away, feeling that it was almost impossible to work alone, to fix his thoughts—in short, that he was but half himself.

As she sped onward, Myra reflected on the new courage her altered circumstances supplied. She was free, because no longer penniless; she need not ask anyone’s permission to do this or that, because she need not ask anyone for money. But she must always be friendly with Mrs. Dallas. She had no right to doubt her good intentions; nor could it be denied that the wish of a mother to see her niece

wedded to her son was nothing to be ashamed of.

When she alighted in the huge, busy, bewildering station, she felt infinitely grateful to Leyton for securing her the comfort of seeing Mrs. Keene's round, kindly face amid a crowd of strangers.

"Oh, my dear, I *am* glad to see you," she exclaimed. "To think that I have never once been able to get away to pay you a visit! But the hotel has been that busy, and Willy away with some of her grandfather's people at Hull. Well, missee, you are looking pounds and pounds better than when you went away. Why, I never saw you look anything like it. Redworth must be a healthy place. My sisters are that glad to have you!"

"And they are so good to me."

"Of course they are; and why not? And Captain Forrester—he *is* a real gentleman. I am sure I pray for him night and morning."

They sat together for a few minutes in the ladies' waiting-room, and then Myra feared to delay any longer. "You needn't stay the whole afternoon with Mrs. Dallas, Miss Myra, my dear; couldn't you take a cup of tea with me before you go back?"

"I will try, Mrs. Keene! I should like to get away as soon as possible."

So Mrs. Keene saw her safely into the train for Earl's Court. It had a curious effect on Myra, this visit to the scene of her former imprisonment. It seemed such years back since she dashed wildly out of her aunt's house, hopeless, desperate, fearing she knew not what. And now! How could she ever thank God enough for her great deliverance?

"Glad I am to see you, miss," said Mrs. Dwyer in a low tone as she admitted Myra. "You look just another creature. She's in the dining-room, and by no means well."

"Myra!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas rising from the sofa where she was lying. "I thought I should never see you again. I have been, I am ill!"

"I am so very sorry," said Myra with genuine compassion. Mrs. Dallas did look ill; her fine eyes were sunken, her lips had lost their rich colour, and her hair was so carelessly coiled up that it was already in disorder; there was an irritated, unsettled expression in her face, quite different from the cool, self-reliant aspect which made her beauty forceful.

"You see," replied Mrs. Dallas, "I am not what I was, and I have you to thank for the change, Myra—you, and my son."

"It grieves me deeply to hear you say so," began Myra.

"Let us say no more about it now," interrupted Mrs. Dallas. "Take off your hat. *You* look well, Myra; you look like another creature! Who has worked this magic?"—looking keenly at her—"It seems to me like animal magnetism; or is it gold magnetism? Has Captain Forrester's unexpected bounty done all this?"

"Is it not enough to make a great change, to feel that I have something of my own? for Captain Forrester says I have a sort of right to it."

"I will tell you what your right is after luncheon," said Mrs. Dallas very deliberately.

"Thank you!" returned Myra removing her hat; while she thought, "She is going to be very disagreeable, and it is quite early; I wish I had not come!" She was, however, genuinely moved to see how ill Mrs. Dallas seemed.

"And have you been staying all this time at that place—Redworth?"

"Yes. It is very nice and quiet, and I get a good deal of sketching."

"Captain Forrester's place is near it, is it not? Pray, is he the attraction?"

"He has been away almost ever since I went there."

"What induced him to give you this—this allowance?"

"I do not know. His own goodness, I suppose."

"Bah! He must have an object. That ally of yours, Leyton, put it into his head. Where is he now?"

"He is painting a picture for Captain Forrester in his own woods."

"Ha! Is *he* living at Redworth, too?"

"Yes! The woods come down almost to the town."

Mrs. Dallas laughed—a sneering, uncomfortable laugh—and there was a moment's pause; then Myra bethought herself that she ought to inquire for Lionel.

"I believe he is well enough," was Mrs. Dallas's reply; "but I know very little about him. He has spent a heap of money. Now he has run away to

Monaco, after quarrelling with me, and what he is doing there, heaven only knows. Another count in your indictment, Myra: but there is no use in talking to you. Tell me how you get through the time?"

"Oh! I read and work, and I have been sketching a good deal lately."

"Yes, I suppose so! with Mr. Leyton?"

"With Mr. Leyton," echoed Myra, feeling more and more uncomfortable. Mrs. Dallas dropped the subject, however, and began to talk of her own ailments, her dislike to Mrs. Dwyer, and her intention to go abroad.

"And why should you not come with me, Myra? You know I always treated you very well?"

"You did, indeed!" cried Myra heartily.

"Then you can have no objection to being with me, and I promise you shall not be troubled with Lionel." This, and more desultory talk brought them through luncheon, after which Mrs. Dallas proposed going to the drawing-room. "You see I have no flowers; I seem to neglect everything," she said throwing herself into an easy-chair. "You see how much I want you, Myra."

Myra felt more than half frightened at the dead set made upon her. "You know, aunt, I am going to study in Paris; I have quite made up my mind to try and be an artist."

"It will be a beggarly business, I suspect," murmured Mrs. Dallas, and kept silence for a few moments.

"Tell me what Forrester said when he proposed to make you this allowance?" she resumed, fixing her big black eyes on Myra.

"I suppose someone told him I was at Redworth; for he came quite unexpectedly one day, with a nice old—well, not exactly old—gentleman—Mr. Wardlaw—and told me I was a sort of cousin. He said if my father had lived he would have had some of the money he (Captain Forrester) had inherited; so he thought it right to provide for me."

"*Some* of the money," repeated Mrs. Dallas with an unpleasant laugh. "He would have had the whole of it, and you would have had it after him but for a trifling omission."

"I should have had all Captain Forrester's money? How could that be?"

"All old George Dallas's money would have gone to your father, as next-of-kin, had he been alive, and to you after him. Unfortunately, one circumstance barred your succession."

"What was that?" asked Myra.

"Your father and mother omitted the ceremony of marriage."

"What *can* you mean?" asked Myra, too bewildered to take in her cruel meaning. "Why, of course they were married."

"Who told you so?"

"Nobody told me so. I know it."

"How do you know?"

"They were always man and wife. Mrs. Keene knew it. She always speaks of my mother as Mrs. Dallas, and says she was an angel of goodness. You cannot be in earnest, Aunt Dallas."

"I am—bitterly in earnest. Hitherto I have not told you, because you were too young; and I thought that, if you married Lionel, you need never have known the stain upon your birth. Lionel knew all about it. Judge, then, how much he loved you when he could overlook what other men would shrink from. You will never find another

who would willingly ally himself with the daughter of an unmarried mother."

"If this be true, then, how was it that *you*, who were not in love with me, agreed to such a degrading marriage for your son?" cried Myra, who was vibrating with indignation tinged with vague, growing terror.

"Because I am as foolish about him as *he* was about you. But I am glad that folly is over. I liked you and bore with you for Lionel's sake; but now it is all over. I am glad he has escaped marriage with you."

"There must be some mistake somewhere," said Myra, the colour fading from her face; "some incompleteness in the ceremony; some—— Oh, no! When I think of my dear, good father, I know it is quite impossible that he should not have been really married to my mother. Have you ever seen her picture? Have you ever looked at that sweet face?"

Mrs. Dallas shook her head.

"No amount of sweet looks can prove correctness of life. The mistake which prevented your parents being married was a very big one—your

mother left her husband to live with your father."

"I do not believe it," said Myra, more collectedly than she had hitherto spoken, and rising to her feet in her wrath. "It is too monstrous; and you are so glad to tell me these cruel things that you make them as bad as you can. I will go and ask——"

"Ask whom you will," interrupted Mrs. Dallas, "you will only find my tale confirmed. Why, you ignorant child, don't you know that if you were *not* base-born you would be a wealthy heiress, with all the world at your feet? Had your father lived, he would have inherited the fortune of old George Dallas, and he could have bequeathed it to you. Had you been legitimate you would have succeeded to it instead of Forrester. Knowing that you were left a beggar, he took compassion on you. It ought to be a warning against such unlawful connections to know that the wretched offspring are cut off from every tie. Have you not wondered that you never heard of your mother, nor of a single connection on her side? Why, you had nothing, and belonged to no one. If you want proof, here—here

is a letter from your father to my husband. I found it among his papers. Do you recognise the writing?"

She took from a small leather bag she usually carried a piece of paper, yellowed by years and covered with small delicate characters, and gave it to Myra, whose eyes filled with tears at the sight of the writing.

"MY DEAR BROTHER [she read],—Your letter has broken the last links which bound us to each other. I cannot dispute the common-sense of your remarks; but they are wasted on me. We—my beloved companion and myself—are the victims of unhappy and most unfortunate circumstances; but no consideration for friends, fortune, or character can part us. No lawfully-married wife could have won profounder respect, more tender affection, than she has, who is everything to me. Should an opportunity ever offer, I shall gladly seize it to make her legally mine. So I bid you—sadly, yet unhesitatingly—farewell; for while you express yourself in such terms we can hold no communication. Yet I shall never forget that I was, perhaps am still, your attached brother,

FREDERIC DALLAS."

Myra looked eagerly back to the beginning.

"No," said Mrs. Dallas, divining her thought,

“there is no guiding date—only the day of the month. But the letter is old. Now, Myra, are you convinced?”

“Convinced that there is some terrible story below it all,” returned Myra with white, trembling lips, but keeping resolutely calm. “I may not be legitimate, but, somehow, I cannot believe my parents to blame; and *you* do not believe that I am illegitimate,” she exclaimed with sudden fire and conviction, “or you would never, *never* have wished me to marry Lionel!”

“Thanks for your gratitude!” returned Mrs. Dallas with a flash of deadly hatred from her eyes. “You would be wiser if you accepted Lionel’s generous, disinterested affection, and hid your painful origin under the cover of his name. It is about the only chance you will ever have of acquiring one. I don’t think you will find any other man willing to take you; and I suppose you are aware that you have no right to the name of Dallas?”

Myra did not reply; she stood with the letter in her hand as if she did not hear, very white and still. Then she crossed over to where she had laid her hat, and deliberately put it on. “I

will keep this letter," she said, turning to face Mrs. Dallas, who watched her with a curious mixture of surprise and apprehension. "Good-bye. I cannot understand you; but I will never voluntarily speak to you or see you again. You have told me this cruel story to revenge yourself, and you have almost broken my heart; but you have not crushed me, nor have you done yourself any good."

She stood yet an instant, her eyes fixed upon her aunt's, which lowered themselves involuntarily, while she thrust the letter into her bosom, and then quietly left the room, closing the door.

"And I cannot understand *her*," said Mrs. Dallas to herself. "Is she a mere gentle, obedient doll? or is there fire and fury under the snow? Have I been unwise in rousing her? Bah! what can she do? She can never disprove the truth of what I have told, and a sense of isolation may drive her back upon Lionel at last."

When Myra left the house, she mechanically took the way towards Keene's Hotel; walking on and on, lost in thought, battling with the conviction, forced upon her by the proof produced by Mrs. Dallas, of the disgrace and degradation which

shrouded her parents and herself. She clung to the idea that if she only knew the *whole* story, there would be some cruel fatality which might in some way exonerate them. Whatever it might be, she was resolved to have faith in those dear ones, her loving memory of whom had kept her soul alive through the parching drought of the social desert in which she had wandered. Now she saw why she had been so alone, and knew that she must always be alone; but she would accept her fate, nor would she ever breathe a word of the bitter secret deposited with her. No! not even to Mrs. Keene would she say a word. Perhaps only members of the family—not her family: she had none—knew the truth about her father and mother, and was it not a sacred duty to shield their reputation, their memory? For herself, she must brace herself up to be alone always. And Jack Leyton? No! he did not know. He had only been in Munich after her dear—dear, though unknown—mother's death, and he could know nothing. Death shrouds most things. She would have liked to ask him some questions, but on this topic she could never speak; silence and endurance must be her portion. Come what might, she would

keep her faith in father and mother intact; one day she would discover the truth, and the truth would justify them.

Wrapped in these distressing thoughts, she had walked on and on mechanically, till she found herself near Hyde Park Corner. To stand about and struggle for a place in an omnibus seemed impossible, she therefore took a cab to Mrs. Keene's, pondering in a half-dazed fashion what she should do. To go back that evening to be questioned as to her interview with Mrs. Dallas was more than she could bear; she must secure a breathing space!

"Why, goodness gracious me!" cried Mrs. Keene when she reached her haven, "how bad you do look, missie! I did not expect you for an hour or more. Have you been took ill?"

"Not exactly, but I have a dreadful headache, and feel faint. Could I stay with you to-night, dear old friend?"

"Why, yes, of course! It would never do for you to be travelling alone. I will telegraph to my sister, and tell her I insisted on your staying. Why, your hands are as cold as ice! What on earth has that—that woman been saying to you?"

"Nothing very pleasant; but it is too long a story to tell now."

"Never mind! I will send off the telegram, and get you a nice hot cup of tea. Take off your hat, Miss Myra, my dear, and just lie down on the sofa, no one shall disturb you; I'll be back directly," and she bustled away.

Myra followed her advice. Indeed, she felt hardly able to stand; her heart beat feebly, as if exhausted after the painful agitation she had undergone. She was either sleeping or partially insensible when Mrs. Keene returned, but she roused herself, and found the fragrant cup of tea presented by her kind hostess very reviving. Mrs. Keene talked on cheerfully about "Keene and Willy," and "the business." Suddenly Myra interrupted her.

"How long ago is it, Mrs. Keene, since you saw my mother?"

"Let me see, the first time I saw her, when she saved me by her care, was—well, it must be quite twenty-two years ago; and the last time you were a wee toddles about two, when I went back to Munich."

"You knew my father also?"

"To be sure I did. A nice elegant gentleman as one could wish to see, and such a devoted husband. He just loved the ground the dear lady trod on. Ah! you don't often see the likes of him now."

"What used they to call my mother in Munich?"

"How do you mean, missie? Why, Mrs. Dallas, to be sure."

"Used she often to go out to parties and those sort of things?"

"Oh, no; she was always with your father. He did not care for society; and she never left him. Have a bit more toast, Miss Myra—you don't eat enough."

"Thank you; I only want the tea—it is so nice. Mrs. Keene, I want to study painting. I believe I am to go to Paris; but, until things are settled, would you let me live with you—board with you, I mean?"

"To be sure I would, and glad to have you; but, you know, missie, my dear, it wouldn't do for you to *live* with me, not for long—you must live with a gentlewoman like yourself."

“I only want a bit of a home—to be with someone who cares a little for me. Oh! I wish I were dead and out of the way.”

“Why, my goodness gracious, Miss Myra——”

Mrs. Keene was beginning, when Myra suddenly threw her arms round her, and, leaning her head on the good woman’s plump shoulder, burst into an agony of tears, sobbing as if her heart would break, until quite exhausted, when Mrs. Keene insisted on putting her to bed and bathing her temples with eau-de-cologne and water. Leaving a night-light on the mantelpiece and the bell-pull within touch of her hand, she sat down and watched the weary girl till her regular breathing told that sleep had blessed her with oblivion.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN THE DEPTHS.

THOUGH immensely relieved by her outburst of weeping, Myra slept but little; and Mrs. Keene insisted on her resting until the afternoon. She took the precaution of writing to her sister by the last post on the previous evening to warn her that Miss Dallas could not be with them before six o'clock; so Myra acquiesced gratefully. She was glad to be at rest—glad to arrange her thoughts and plan her future. Everything was changed and hopeless in the new light shed upon life by the revelation of Mrs. Dallas. Resignation and work must give her strength, and silence be her consolation.

It was a wet evening when she reached Redworth—wet and dull. As soon as the train paused beside the platform, the door of her carriage was opened by Leyton.

“You have given us all a fright, mademoiselle,”

he said, looking sharply at her as he assisted her to alight; "and I must say your looks do not belie the report we received. What has happened? You seemed in the most robust health when we parted yesterday."

"Yes; I seemed quite right. But it was hot and close in town; the noise, the rush, seemed to overpower me, and brought on a violent headache."

"Naturally enough. You have not quite got rid of it yet. Come—I will not let you walk up. Here is a fly, as they call them."

"I can walk quite well."

"My dear Myra, you must do as your guardian directs."

Myra smiled and obeyed. The drive to the High Street, short though it was, sufficed to show her what an effectual poison Mrs. Dallas had introduced into her existence. She was very silent; for she had to look at every topic which suggested itself before she spoke, lest it might evoke curiosity or awake suspicion. Then Leyton scarcely took his eyes from her face. Why did he look at her so intently? Did he know? Did he suspect that *she* knew?

“Do I look very dreadful, Jack, that you look at me so steadily?” she asked at length, with a faint smile.

“Forgive me. I did not know—that is, there’s something come into your face, or gone out of it, since you left me yesterday that worries me. Something has happened yesterday which you will not tell—that is, at present. But you do not intend to keep me always in the dark. I am sure you will trust me, Myra.”

Here they stopped at Miss Foley’s door; and Myra was able to avoid a direct answer.

The good sisters were ready to receive their young favourite with a hearty welcome; both exclaimed at her pale cheeks and languid air. Then Miss Foley returned to mind her own business, while Miss Letitia remained to pour out tea and wait upon the traveller.

The evening meal was spread near one of the windows of the best parlour, through which came the fresh scent of the flower garden beneath; the outlook over the rich green of the race-course to the ruined abbey, behind which the sun was setting, suggested peace and prosperity. The room had been

adorned with flowers in deference to Myra's taste, and the table prettily laid.

"You will, perhaps, join Miss Dallas at tea, Mr. Leyton?" said Miss Letitia with her sweetest simper, her head a little on one side.

"With pleasure; I always enjoy a cup of tea here," returned Leyton readily; and he continued to speak of the pleasant view, the excellent position of the house, and such matters, in what Miss Letitia considered a fascinating manner, until Myra had returned after laying aside her hat and brushing away the dust of travel.

"It is so nice to come back here," she said with a sigh as she stirred her tea; "the sweetness and repose are heavenly after the turmoil of London."

"You used not to dislike London so much," observed Leyton.

"I knew no other place to compare it with!" she replied.

Then Miss Letitia inquired for Mrs. Keene, and the conversation turned on her husband, her hotel, and her grand-daughter, until Miss Letitia rang for Keziah to clear away.

“You’ll be wishing to speak on business, I dare say,” said the worthy spinster, “so I shall go and do a little shopping before closing time;” and she left the room.

Myra went across to the window, which was furnished with an old-fashioned seat, and sitting down somewhat wearily in a corner, leaned her elbow on the window-sill, and rested her head on her hand, her face turned towards the garden.

Leighton followed, and took possession of the opposite angle, and having looked at her in silence for a moment, exclaimed—

“You are awfully dead beat, Myra?”

“Yes, I am ashamed of myself!” turning her eyes on his, and trying to pull herself together. “I shall be quite right after a quiet day in this nice, home-like place.”

“Myra, tell me about your interview with Mrs. Dallas.”

“It was not pleasant, as you may imagine; she said all I expected, and more.”

“I hope you did not see that cub—her son?”

“Oh, no! thank heaven! but she said he was ill, and that it was *my* fault; that upset me a good

deal! If he is so fond of me, why do I not love him?"

"I'm sure *I* don't know," returned Leyton rather grimly. "I suppose you are one of the stony-hearted, who do not respond to the affection lavished upon you."

Myra shook her head, and smiled a thoughtful smile. "No one has ever lavished much upon me, Jack. I am rather unfortunate in shrinking from the only person who did love me—" and she shuddered slightly.

"I don't wonder at it," cried Leyton. "He must be a selfish hound, to set his mother worrying you in this way."

"But I don't like the idea of his being ill and unhappy."

"Nonsense, Myra, don't be morbid! If you let this sort of sentimentality get hold of you, why you'll let yourself be persuaded to marry young Ashby out of pity."

"Oh, no, no, no!" she exclaimed. "*You* would not allow me, would you?"

"I could not prevent you; you could marry whom you chose! You may allow me to call my-

self your guardian, and I may be useful to you in that position, but I have no power or authority of any kind over you!"

"Haven't you, Jack?" looking into his face with a smile at once sweet and playful, that seemed to say, "You know you have"—a smile that sent a thrill through Leyton's veins, and kept him silent for a moment

"Was this all that passed between you and Mrs. Dallas?" he resumed.

"She said a great many more unpleasant things, but there is no use in repeating them. At last, I told her I thought she was actuated by anger and unkindness, and that I would never voluntarily see her again."

"Bravo, Myra, well said!" cried Leyton in hearty approval; "I hope you will stick to that. Why should she annoy or insult you? I wonder what that woman's game can be? Well, I hope you have seen the last of her. I fear she must have upset you frightfully."

"She did—and, Jack, I do not want to speak of her any more. I want to put her out of my head, and give myself altogether to my work. Do

you think, if I am very diligent and try very hard, I may do well enough to make a place for myself—a little place?”

“I do not doubt it, Myra. You have taste and ability; but what does this sudden ambition mean? The day before yesterday you wanted spurring, to-day——”

“Oh! I have been reflecting, and I am ashamed of my own idleness and indifference. I must show Captain Forrester that I can build my fortune on the basis he so kindly and generously gave me.”

Leyton did not reply; he looked at her steadily with a surprised, questioning expression, which gradually softened to one of yearning tenderness. Myra turned slightly away, and looked across the stretch of green.

“Myra,” said Jack, leaning towards her, and taking the hand which lay listlessly in her lap, “you are keeping whatever it was that most distressed or offended you from me. I think it will relieve you to tell me; and don’t you think you might trust me?” There was a pause, she left her hand in his as she turned slowly towards him—

“Trust you, Jack!” she murmured in a low

tone. "Of course I trust you. Whom have I to trust but you? It is no use, however, dwelling on unpleasant things; so we will say no more about Mrs. Dallas or her unkindness."

She pressed his hand slightly as she withdrew her own.

"Very well, Myra. But I will tell you what makes me uneasy. I am awfully afraid that Dallas woman has said or done something which may dispose you to think yourself bound to marry Lionel Ashby, even against your own instincts. Remember, Myra, I would never consent to such a thing—never. I would rather shoot him, if I swung for it!"

Myra smiled at his vehemence.

"You need not fear, Jack. I will never marry anyone you don't like."

"Then you will have a very limited choice," said Leyton with a short laugh.

"Tell me," asked Myra, as if anxious to change the subject, "did you get any work done yesterday? It was quite fine as we drew near London."

"In the late afternoon I did a sketch of the keeper's lodge; but I could not make much of it—

I was not in the vein. If to-morrow is fine, will you come for a long day in the woods? The sunset promises well. I think a few more bright evenings will finish all I want out of doors. Then I want to make a picture of the interior of that old abbey; and you must do it, too."

"If you think I could, Jack."

"You could try. I do not think you would find it difficult. What time will you come out to-morrow?"

"I will come late in the afternoon and join you, Jack. I do not feel inclined to draw or do anything; so do not wait for me. I will come if I can; and I think I should like to go and lie down now—talking makes my head ache—and I want to be quite, quite well to-morrow, and able to begin work in real earnest."

"In short, you want to get rid of me. I wish to heaven you had not gone up to that infernal rackety London and brought on that headache."

"It would have come on anyhow, I daresay," said Myra with a sigh.

"Well, good-bye, if I must go," said Leyton.

He held her hand for a moment, and then went

away for a long walk across the fields to commune and wrestle with himself. What was the reason of Myra's disturbance? Why did she seem averse to be with him? Had his almost involuntary embrace, when he saved her from falling, suggested to her the nature of the feelings she had roused within him? And did she shrink from him with a girl's natural timidity, or any serious reluctance to change a friend for a lover? Was it possible that the hearty liking which she evinced towards him with such delicious frankness was an indication that he was fated never to call forth a deeper and more passionate attachment? However that might be, Leyton was in no doubt as regarded his own condition of mind. He knew that he longed for the love of this lonely young waif with all his soul and with all his strength. All the fire and energy of early youth seemed to have come back to him, mellowed by a considerate tenderness, which made no sacrifice seem too great for the happiness and welfare of the girl he had grown to love so well. Why, then, should he hesitate? His prudential calculations of a fortnight before melted into thin air. He was getting on; his pictures were going

off; he had a couple of commissions besides "A Summer Evening." The future was brightening; and Myra sorely needed a home and a protector. He would risk it, and ask her to be his wife. If she refused—well, the worst effect would be the crippling of his powers to serve her; but that would arrange itself after a short period of discomfort. If she loved him, life would be only too heavenly. Why had he hesitated so long? Now he would only wait for the first promising opportunity to try his chance.

* * * * *

Leyton called early the following morning, and heard that Miss Dallas had not yet left her room; nor did she join him that afternoon. He wasted his time looking and waiting for her, and returned feeling anxious and irritable.

In the evening he found her, however. She was at the piano, while Miss Letitia was diligently plying her needle. Myra was still pale, and the hand she gave Leyton was cold and tremulous. She offered to play some of the old airs of which he was fond—perhaps, he thought, to avoid con-

versation. She was very sweet and calm, and spoke with pleasure of recommencing work on the morrow.

But the morrow was dull and damp. It was, therefore, not until the third day after Myra's unfortunate expedition to London that Leyton found himself alone with her in the woods, where they had spent so many happy hours.

But a change had come o'er the spirit of their dream, a change which greatly puzzled Leyton—for it showed itself in Myra alone. She had never been talkative; but at times, if touched or interested, she would speak of her own feelings and impressions with delightful candour. To-day she was not more silent, but Leyton felt that she thought before she spoke, while there was an indescribable resoluteness in her composure that made her seem much older than the week before. She was very diligent and careful in her work, frequently asking Leyton for advice and guidance. She listened to him, however, as sympathetically as ever, but was only like her old impulsive self when she looked at and commented on *his* painting.

The curious gravity and collectedness which had

come to her had its effect on Leyton. He thought of her even more continuously than before; the new phase she had developed interested him profoundly—as any veiled corner of heart or mind in a woman almost always does interest men for whom the undiscovered has so many charms — but it held him in check. There was something in her mood so unfavourable to a declaration of love—so far away from passion or any recognition of the melting mood—that Leyton determined to wait and watch. Myra had been suddenly transformed from a tender, clinging, impulsive girl—still half a child—to a thoughtful, self-reliant woman, and, therefore, more worth winning than ever.

A week had nearly passed since Myra received the cruel blow dealt by her aunt, and the closing shadows warned her and her companion it was time to return.

“It is charming, Jack,” she exclaimed, coming behind him to look at his picture, when she had put up her own materials. “You will not touch it any more?”

“You think I had better not?”

“Oh! you must not mind what I say, I do not

know enough ; but it seems to me that it cannot be made better."

"Perhaps ! I'll take a look at it to-morrow. If you are right, we'll say good-bye to the woods for the present. You have come on with your trees wonderfully, and to-morrow we'll try the ruins ; those arches will be good practice for you."

"Yes. I am very anxious to try something fresh."

"I am awfully sorry to leave the woods, though. It is many a long year since I have enjoyed my days as I have here."

"Sweet woods," said Myra as if to herself, and looking round, "good-bye !"

"Oh, come, Myra ! we are not going away for ever."

"Who knows ?" she replied dreamily ; and, taking up her colour-box, she walked on slowly, while Leyton loaded himself with the rest of the impedimenta, which he usually left at the keeper's lodge close by. "You do not care to make a *détour* this evening ?" he asked as they walked homewards.

"No, I do not care for a long walk. I daresay in a few days I shall feel fatigue less."

“You have not recovered from that confounded trip to town yet, Myra.”

“Not quite; but I am much better”—a pause of some minutes, then she began again—“Jack, you said you knew some people in Paris who might take me in; would you ask them about it?”

“Why, I thought you did not like the idea of going there—that you dreaded it, in short!”

“I do not like it now; but I have been thinking very hard, Jack, and I see that it is weak and foolish to hesitate on the brink of anything. I see, also, that I ought to learn to depend on myself, and be sufficient to myself; so I want to go away, and begin at once.”

“It is a pretty hard lesson to learn, Myra. You cannot begin just yet, however. Paris is awfully hot in July, and the studios indescribably stuffy; wait till the end of August. Meanwhile, I will write to Madame Marcy and get all information for you. What has put this so suddenly into your head?”

“A conviction that I must not lose time—that I must work seriously.”

“But you have not been doing at all badly.”

"Tell me," continued Myra, not heeding him, "do not real artists grow to love their work better than anything in the world, and want nothing beyond it?"

"Well, yes; some do."

"Do you think I shall ever be like that?"

"It is hard to say. I rather doubt it. *I* am very much taken up with my art; but I want one or two things desperately besides. Then I am not what really great painters are—artists pure and simple. I am more mixed."

"I suppose I ought to study life?" said Myra with a sigh.

"You'll do no good work if you don't; and it's awfully hard for a woman to do anything first-rate."

"I suppose so. Why is it, Jack?"

"Well, it's not deficiency of intellect—it is more difference. Then you are terribly weighted with heart—or whatever the thing we call heart is. Very few can stand alone. When they can—well, it is generally the hard, inartistic women who are able to make a place for themselves. I do not think you are that sort, Myra; you are too womanly to be independent."

"I must do something, you know, Jack; and I like drawing and painting best. Do you really think it is worth my while to study and spend money?"

"Certainly. Many women make a good thing of it, especially when they are not too ambitious."

"I am glad to hear you say so. I am not ambitious, but I want to succeed in this."

"And you will, no doubt. Let us go on to the old abbey, and choose a bit for to-morrow morning's work."

This took a considerable time; and Leyton spent some more explaining to Myra how arches should be treated, to which she gave earnest attention. Then they walked slowly to Myra's abode, and parted at the door; for she did not ask him to come in. This, too, was a departure from her ordinary frankly-expressed wish for his company.

The weather proved propitious, and Leyton succeeded in doing a very pretty sketch of the ruined abbey. He was very pleased at finding it prove a better subject than he expected. Occupied with his own work, he had not paid much attention to

Myra's; and when they returned from the scene of their labours, he said decidedly—

“I will come in and see what you have done. I have neglected you rather these last days.”

“Thank you,” returned Myra; and went on before to open the parlour door and give him light enough to avoid the dangers of the little stairway.

It wanted an hour or more of tea-time, and the Misses Foley were both busy in the shop. The parlour was empty, and flooded with the mellow evening light.

“Now, then, for the most rigid criticism,” said Leyton, seeking Myra's eyes, to pour into them an assurance from his own that her meanest attempts had a value for him; but hers were occupied by the strap of her sketching-book, and he noticed that her hands were not too steady.

She opened the book before him, and then took a step or two away to the window, as if she lacked courage to look on at his examination. She was tired, and stood with her head leaning against the grey chintz curtains which draped the window.

“Do you know, Myra, I really cannot compli-

ment you on your progress during the last few days? Your hand is not so steady; your lines are nothing like as bold and free as they used to be. I suppose it is the result of——”

He stopped abruptly. His ear caught something like a suppressed sob, and, looking round, he saw that Myra was holding her handkerchief to her eyes.

“Myra,” he exclaimed, coming quickly to her side, “what is it? I was a brute to speak so roughly about your drawings. I——”

“No, no; you were quite right. You have said the truth. But I should not mind that, only it makes me fear I may never be able to do anything; and if I haven’t art to cling to, I have nothing left in life. Do you think I shall be a total failure, Jack?” and she laid her hand on his arm.

Leyton caught it in both his own and kissed it tenderly.

“Myra, my darling,” he said in a low tone, full of passionate feeling, “something disturbs you which you will not tell me. Let me tell you *my* secret—if it is a secret.” He quietly drew her to him as he spoke. “I love you with all my heart and soul.

The days you were away were intolerable. All I ask, all I desire, is to have you beside me for the rest of my life. I am not worthy of you, dearest. I have been a reckless fellow, I know; but I could be wise and careful for *your* sake. I have not much to offer you; but you should have a happy home, if it were a humble one. And I want you, Myra—I want you, terribly. Could you be happy as my wife, dear?”

He tried to put his arm round her, but she drew back.

“You wish me to marry you, Jack?” she said in accents of the deepest surprise. “Oh! I cannot. It is quite impossible.”

“Why? Am I too old and grim for you? I am not so hard as I seem, Myra. You have woke up all the tenderness of my nature. I could be lover and friend too.”

“Oh, don’t speak to me like that,” cried Myra, growing deadly pale, her lips quivering. “It is so good of you to care for me. It is such pain to say ‘no’ to you. There is no one I value so much as you; but——” A pause, while she collected herself for a great effort. “I can *never* be your wife.

Forgive me for my ingratitude—my seeming ingratitude—and put me away out of your mind.”

“And will you give me no reason?”

“I have none to give, Jack, except——” (a tremulous, miserable little smile), “that I would rather not.”

“Enough, Myra. I will not pain you by any further appeal.” He turned from her, and paced the room to and fro for a minute. “I have been foolish and hasty,” he resumed, pausing beside her. “You were unprepared—you never thought of me as a lover. Yet I have been your lover for months. I was fathoms deep before I knew it. Listen to me, Myra; forget this outburst. I wish to heaven I had not spoken. For God’s sake, let me still be your friend. I shall not again transgress—not, at least, if I see you are of the same mind—but I want to be of use to you. You will not refuse me this pleasure. And who knows?”—smiling—“I may grow strong enough to transplant you into that division of the heart where brotherly affection only flourishes. Myra, you frighten me. You look so awfully white, and—— Are you sure you are not making some mistake?”

"No," she returned, in a low tone, but firmly. "I will never be your wife, Jack."

"Then I will trouble you no more now. I will leave Redworth. I will stay away for a while, to let you forget the pain I have caused you; and when I return we shall be friends, and nothing more, as long as you like. Then we will settle about Paris and—and your studies. So I will leave you. You'll give me your hand, dear, and trust me as much as ever?"

"I trust you as I never can trust any other creature," exclaimed Myra, bursting into a passion of tears. "Go, dear Jack—do go!" She could endure no more.

He was greatly impressed by her emotion, and even alarmed lest Mrs. Dallas and her son had, by force or fraud, entangled her in some promise or undertaking which had created a barrier between Myra and himself. "She was awfully shaken," he thought. "I don't like leaving her alone."

Pausing at the door, he rang the house-bell, and, on the appearance of Keziah, begged her to let Miss Foley know that Miss Dallas was over-fatigued and a little faint, a message which immediately

brought the tender-hearted Letitia to her admired young friend.

Myra was, indeed, prostrate. That she should be obliged to put from her lips with her own hand the cup of joy for which her soul was athirst, was the cruellest portion fate could have allotted her: to be loved and sought by Jack Leyton, and obliged to turn from him; to refuse the joy of spending her life with and for him. But she must be resolute and strong; she must shut her eyes to the heaven which beckoned her.

The words of Mrs. Dallas rang in her ears—"You will never find a man who would knowingly ally himself with the daughter of an unmarried mother." And Jack was a well-born gentleman—fastidious, too, in spite of his Bohemianism. He must be ignorant of her mother's sad story, or he would never, never have thought of her as a wife; and she must neither take advantage of that ignorance nor let the true reason of her refusal pass her lips. No; she would be faithful to her dear dead mother, who had always lived in her memory as a sweet saint, whose excellence she must try to emulate.

For this she had hurt Jack. He had looked so cast down; his hand shook when he grasped hers at parting; and she had been obliged to let him go when she longed to throw her arms round his neck and tell him, with tears and kisses, how well she loved him. Her grief was so intense that her tears dried up under its scorching intensity. She could not endure the well-meant but wordy sympathy of the kindly Letitia, and, under the plea of fatigue and a return of her bad headache, she escaped to the shelter and solitude of her own room—not to do battle with her sorrow, but to lie prostrate under its cruel stings, till exhaustion brought oblivion.

CHAPTER XXV.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

It was long since Mrs. Dallas felt such serene satisfaction as this paying of what she considered her just debt to Myra afforded her. She had, indeed, paid that ungrateful and unmanageable girl more fully than she expected. She intended to wound her pride and lower her self-esteem. She saw that she had pierced the depths of her heart by the revelation of her mother's shame.

Mrs. Dallas greatly enjoyed the triumph; still, she had not gained the point at which she aimed—not with any high hopes of success, certainly. Myra's whole bearing, her manner of accepting the onslaught made upon her, showed Mrs. Dallas that she had herself torn open a gulf between them which it would be difficult to fill up or bridge over; yet she was more alert and cheerful after this inter-

view than she had been since Myra had escaped from her.

She put on a pretty black dress—the first she had permitted herself to order—of “the mitigated grief” class, and prepared to visit Lady Shirland, who was soon going to leave town for Scotland. It was now near the end of June, and the dowager hated the dregs of the season.

What Dorothea intended to do she did not know ; but she could not and would not have her plans spoiled by Dorothea’s whims.

“Very glad to see you, Mrs. Dallas,” she exclaimed when that lady made her appearance. “I am afraid you must think me very remiss. I have been going to see you every day, and never could manage it. It has been an overwhelming season, and Dorothea has been more *entêtée* than ever. This new German doctor—who is, or says he is, a baron—has gained such an ascendancy over her that I do not know what may happen. It is really too provoking. Now, do sit down and tell me all your news. You are not looking particularly well ; and I do not wonder, after all the worry you have had with that girl. I tell you what, Mrs. Dallas,

you must come down to Glenusquebaugh and spend a nice quiet time with *me*."

"The best restorative you could suggest, dear Lady Shirland. I shall be but too glad to act upon it."

"Well, and what tidings have you of that rather inexplicable niece of yours?"

"She spent the day with me lately, and is properly penitent for her folly. I think she would be glad to return to me. I fancy she has found out that she is really friendless, and suspects there is something not quite right about her antecedents. She has taken refuge with some book-selling women at Redworth. I believe she acts as an assistant there. They are relatives of that Mrs. Keene. If such are her tastes, she had better remain where she is."

"It is curious," remarked Lady Shirland thoughtfully. "And your son?"

"Don't ask," exclaimed Mrs. Dallas passionately. "The mischief that a cold, heartless coquette can do to a fiery, impulsive young man like my Lionel is almost incalculable. He has given up his employment, and is wandering on the Continent—

an easy prey to adventurers of both sexes. She has spoiled his life. I am always afraid of what tidings the post may bring of him."

"Try and get him to return to you. Find out a pretty girl with a little money to soothe and flatter him, and he will come all right. After all, that Myra Dallas was an interesting girl, whatever her faults may be. She would have been a wretched match for your son. I never could understand why you agreed to it."

"A mother's weakness," murmured Mrs. Dallas.

"Very great weakness, my dear friend. Pray, do you know that Mr. Leyton is staying at Redworth? He is painting a picture for that lucky young fellow, Cecil Forrester; so I suppose your runaway *protégée* and her old friend see a good deal of each other."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Dallas, then stopped. "And do *you* know, Lady Shirland, that Captain Forrester has settled an annuity on Miss Dallas—not much, but quite enough to keep her above want?" she added.

"You don't say so! Very nice and honourable of him. I am delighted to hear it. It must be a

relief to your mind you can conscientiously wash your hands of that troublesome girl now."

"I do not wish to act unkindly or revengefully towards her, Lady Shirland. Even now, if she wanted to return——"

"I should have nothing whatever to do with her," interrupted Lady Shirland promptly. "There is, or there ought to be, a limit to benevolence and forgiveness, and all that sort of thing."

"It is hard to forgive some offences."

"Of course it is—very hard. Oh, Dorothea"—as the door opened to admit that young lady—"I did not expect you so soon."

"I have only looked in for a moment. My dear Mrs. Dallas—so delighted to see you! I have just been talking to Captain Forrester at the flower show, and he tells me he has made great friends with Myra. Suppose he fell in love with her, and——"

"Suppose the skies fell, and we caught larks," interposed Lady Shirland contemptuously.

"Poor dear mamma has no sentiment or imagination," said Dorothea to Mrs. Dallas with a sweet smile. "I have just looked in, mamma, to say that

I have quite made up my mind to go with you to Glenusquebaugh. I think quiet and mountain air will set me up."

"Very well, Dorothea; but I will *not* ask Dr. von Siedlitz——"

"The baron? Oh, I don't want *him*. It would be better to give quarters to Mr. Leyton. *He* is in town, Mr. Wardlaw has just been telling me, and is going up to Scotland to get some materials for a picture. He is really becoming quite popular. I thought it best to tell you *at once*, mamma. You might, perhaps, let Mr. Leyton know that the scenery of Glenusquebaugh is very fine, and that we could put him up?"

"Yes, Dorothea, I will write this evening. It would be a relief to have one reasonable being in the house."

"It would, indeed," said Dorothea with conviction. "Now I must run away—I am due at Lady Edward Chetwynd's. Don't expect to see me till eight o'clock. Good-bye, Mrs. Dallas. What has become of Mr. Ashby?"

She ran off without waiting for a reply.

"So the baron's day is done," exclaimed Lady

Shirland. "I am thankful. She has always a standing fancy for Jack Leyton. I wish he would make up his mind and marry her. What a relief it would be to mine!"

"But, Lady Shirland, hasn't Mr. Leyton led rather a wild life?"

"Perhaps so; but it *has* been lived and done with. He is quite a gentleman; and I should be only too thankful to have Dorothea settled decently and off my hands. I am quite weary of her."

"Under those circumstances——" began Mrs. Dallas, when other visitors were announced.

Mrs. Dallas, however, stayed on; for amongst them was a certain hypochondriac retired civilian, whom she used to meet years ago in India, and who was highly pleased to renew his acquaintance with her. He was quite interested respecting her son, herself, and her late husband, and finally begged leave to call, which Mrs. Dallas graciously accorded.

She then took leave, and walked home in deep, and on the whole satisfactory, thought. Though she had very slight evidence to go upon, she had a strong conviction that it was perhaps a

girlish fancy for Leyton which was the chief cause of Myra's aversion for Lionel. Now, if he married Dorothea—which, of course, a needy man like Leyton would be only too glad to do—that would be another well-deserved punishment to Myra. If, again, Lionel would only come back and lay siege to Dorothea, and so cut out Leyton, after his virtually encouraging Myra to reject Lionel, while she would be left lamenting, this would be poetical justice after Mrs. Dallas's own heart. Then, when she found she was despised and deserted, Myra might be glad to turn to Lionel after all.

“But it might be too late,” mused Mrs. Dallas. “I wish Lionel would return. He is draining me. I fear he plays high. I must nerve myself to resist his demands. He is ungrateful too. Once he gets over this business he will be more himself, I am sure.”

Some friendly divinity seemed to have heard her wish; for, on entering her drawing-room, a brownish-yellow envelope on the table caught her eye. She hastily opened and read it.

“I will be with you to-morrow morning,” it ran, and was signed “Lionel.”

"I am going to be lucky once more," she said to herself as she rang the bell to summon Mrs. Dwyer and give directions respecting her son's room, and order a tempting dinner to welcome him home.

As Lionel did not mention by which route he would travel, his mother spent most of the following day listening for the sounds of his arrival. He did not, however, make his appearance till nearly eight o'clock.

"My dear Lionel, you look dreadfully ill," said Mrs. Dallas, kissing him, but not effusively. "Had you a bad passage? You seem to have suffered a good deal."

"Yes, I generally do; but I was rather seedy before I started. I should like some brandy and soda to pick me up before I dress; you must tell me all the news after dinner. How dusty and stuffy London seems!"

Lionel was amiable enough, trying even to be amusing and complimentary—an effort by no means usual with him. He ate little, however, and his mother's keen eye discerned something uneasy and nervous under his assumed gaiety.

When they were alone, she proceeded to give him an account of Myra's visit, suppressing, however, the most important feature in it—even implying, without committing herself to any distinct statement, that Myra might be induced to return to her aunt's guardianship.

“It seems that Leyton, who mixes himself up in her affairs in an odd way, has been at Redworth on the pretence of painting. From what Myra told me, she appears to have been acting as assistant to these Foleys, who keep a booksellers' and stationers' shop. This brings me to the most curious part of the story. You know Captain Forrester's place, Wickham Hall, is close to Redworth?”

“No, I did *not* know.”

“Well, it is; and somehow Forrester fell in with Myra—or Leyton, whom he patronises, drew his attention to her. At all events, he has settled an annuity on her for life—a hundred and fifty or sixty pounds a year, I believe—so that she is independent. I wish you would run down and see her, for Leyton is away, or——”

“What!” interrupted Lionel, who seemed greatly

struck; "has Forrester done this of his own free will? Can he have any idea? Does it not look like hedging?"

"No, I am sure not. He is a curious, almost eccentric, young man, I am told, undisguisedly careful of his own interests, his money, and all that is his. I hear he thinks of standing for West Blandfordshire if Lord Arthur Compton accepts the Chiltern Hundreds. I don't fancy he is generous, but he wishes to be thought just."

"Mother, you suggest ideas which I have mentioned to you before."

"Put them out of your head, Lionel," said his mother gravely. "They are simple folly."

"All men are vulnerable through self-interest."

"Yes: but there are counteracting influences which you seem unable to understand. I will not listen to you. Tell me by what line you travelled. You arrived at an unusual hour."

"I came by Dieppe."

"Ah; then you had been cleaned out, or you would not have faced the long crossing."

"You are right," he returned, throwing himself back in his chair with a desperate attempt at

reckless indifference. "I have just half-a-crown, a franc and a half, and some coppers in my pocket."

"I expected as much," said Mrs. Dallas, her brows meeting in an angry frown. "Now pray inform me what debts you have left behind."

"I can't," he said, in a more natural manner. "I have been awfully unlucky, and—and—three figures will scarcely cover them. However, I have learnt a lesson at last. Clear me this once, mother, and I swear to you I'll never touch a card again. I'll turn over a new leaf, and be guided by you."

Mrs. Dallas did not reply; she kept her eyes fixed on the table, looking the picture of stony indifference.

"Do not refuse to help me," urged Lionel. "I have got a couple of weeks' time to pay up, and the hotel bills are not heavy, if you could pay these first. You will see, I shall become a new man. If I have any luck in marriage or anything, I will repay you, and I swear I will never touch a card again."

"It will be a great benefit to you if you keep this oath, Lionel, but it will not draw any money

from me. I told you before I should not again pay your debts—certainly not what are termed debts of honour. I am resolved not to be persuaded or cajoled. As you got into trouble, so you must get out of it.”

Lionel looked in his mother's set face, and then, throwing prudence and self-restraint to the winds, burst into a furious tirade against her harshness, penuriousness, selfishness, accusing her of having caused his father's death by her conduct, and many other wild assertions, his fine dark eyes blazing with murderous fury.

Nothing, however, moved her. When, at last, he paused for want of more abusive expressions, she said, in a composed voice—

“If you have not run up an outrageous hotel bill, I will pay it—but nothing else; and nothing shall shake me from my purpose. As you are scarcely sane, I shall leave you to recover yourself; and pray remember that the lock of my despatch box, where I keep my most important papers, is a patent, and if tampered with will tell tales.”

“Do you think I want your infernal papers?”

screamed Lionel. "I can do without them, as you shall find out." But his mother left the room without noticing his polite remark. A few minutes after she heard, in the quiet of her own room, the front door shut with a violence which shook the house.

"I must hold to my resolution," she thought, "or I shall be beggared; and then who will help me? Not Lionel! He is selfish; yet I love him. Why would not that girl accept him? She is ruining us both." She turned to the large bureau, and opening it took out her bank-book, and began to make calculations on some half-sheets of note-paper, which were neatly stowed away in a side drawer.

* * * * *

The day but one after this scene Captain Forrester was busy writing in his room in a quiet hotel in Dover Street. He had soon tired of his yachting expedition, and returned to worry his solicitor, stock-broker, and the house agent. In fact, the lord of Wickham Manor had the taste and abilities of a man of business; and, except when hunting, shooting, or inspecting the improvements on his estate, he was only happy when rushing about London,

driving bargains, and struggling to get the best of everything at the smallest cost. Yet he was not ungenerous; only painfully aware of the value of money. To him enter a waiter, salver in hand, and on it lay a note and a card. Forrester glanced at the first with a frown—it was from his solicitor, who apologised for not keeping his appointment that morning; then he took the card and read, “Mr. Lionel Ashby.” “Who the deuce is he? I seem to know the name. Hum, ah! I know. Show the gentleman up.”

The next moment Lionel entered. He was exceedingly well dressed, and good-looking, with a winning smile showing a row of dazzlingly white teeth, and had an air of deferential politeness; but the impression he created on Forrester can be best described by that gentleman’s mental question, “Does he want to tempt me to join some bubble company, with his grinning civility?” while he said aloud, looking at the card, “Mr. Ashby, I don’t think I have had the pleasure of meeting you before.”

“No, Captain Forrester, but I think I can prove myself to be a sort of connection.”

“Pray sit down, Mr. Ashby,” rather stiffly.

"Thank you! let me explain. I am the stepson of your relative, Colonel Edward Dallas."

"Ah! rather a distant relative."

"Had he lived, Captain Forrester, he would have been a little too near the main line of the family for your interests."

"I am aware of that," shortly.

"Returning a couple of days ago from the Continent," resumed Ashby, "I heard from my mother of your generous consideration for my cousin (as I have always considered her), and I have called to thank you very sincerely. Myra Dallas is a little difficult to deal with; she might have had a happy, comfortable home with my mother if she chose, without troubling you, but——"

"I wonder why the deuce she left it!" ejaculated Forrester as he paused. "Not that I regret in any way having undertaken to provide for her; she has been rather ill-treated on the whole. Had her father nothing to leave her? You seem to know something of the family affairs."

"He hadn't much, but as he died intestate—like your wealthy kinsman, George Dallas—whatever he left went to his brother, my step-father."

"Ha! that's the reason Mrs. Dallas took her in. Very kind, I'm sure," said Forrester, while he thought, "What the deuce is the young fellow driving at?" and looked openly at the clock.

"Yes, I am keeping you," remarked Lionel in reply to the look. "But you will find I have something to say that is worth your while waiting to hear!"

"Indeed! Pray, let me hear it then."

Lionel smiled. He knew he had a great card to play, yet he felt nervous about playing it; uneasy as to how he could best introduce it, and oppressed by the sledge-hammer directness of Forrester's manner.

"I suppose you did not expect Mr. Dallas would have died without leaving a will?" he began reflectively.

"I have never thought about it. It never crossed my mind that his money would come to any of us. He could not bear the sight of anyone belonging to him. It was quite an accident its coming to me."

"No. I suppose if this girl, Myra, had been legitimate she would have nabbed the fortune."

"No doubt. Hard on her, but good for me; that's one reason why I was willing to provide for her."

"It would be uncommonly awkward if she were to prove legitimate after all?"

"Yes, deuced inconvenient! but as she isn't, there is no use thinking about it."

Lionel laughed—an uneasy, hesitating kind of laugh. "You know nothing is so imminent as the unexpected," he said, with an odd, mocking, malignant look.

"Well, Mr. Ashby, if you have nothing more important to communicate, I am afraid I must leave you, as I have an appointment——"

"No, you must hear me!" exclaimed Lionel, spurred to action. "What I want to say is—well, nothing very pleasant. I—I happen to know that it is quite possible Myra Dallas may be legitimate, but—it's a bit of knowledge I've never told to mortal, and never will, if—if you wish it kept a secret."

"Why, what the deuce do you mean?" cried Forrester, opening his eyes in somewhat contemptuous astonishment. "How could there be any question about her illegitimacy?"

"I assure you there is. It would be a change for you if she were to set up a claim to the Dallas property."

"If you imagine that I should be disturbed by any attempt at imposition, you are very much mistaken. I should carry the war into the enemy's quarters. Pray, who has been putting you up to this folly?"

"No one, Captain Forrester; but I thought it well to warn you, because someone less friendly to you than I am might inform Miss Dallas of her rights and egg her on to attack you."

Forrester laughed scornfully.

"What, in the name of heaven, has put this rubbish into your head?"

"Because, when I was assisting my mother to regulate the Colonel's papers, we came upon a lot of his brother's. I don't fancy the Colonel ever looked through them——" He paused.

"Did you find any will?" asked Forrester, with animation.

"Will? No; but—tied up with some old love letters, was a certificate of marriage between Frederic Dallas and Myra's mother."

Forrester's face hardened into an expression of contemptuous incredulity.

"She committed bigamy, then. How could she marry when her husband was alive?"

"He was not alive."

"Pray, what is your object in telling me this extraordinary story, Mr. Ashby?"

"I thought you might like to know, that——"

"I would rather *not* know," returned Forrester, with a grim smile; "but as you have opened the subject, I must get to the bottom of it."

"I assure you, Captain Forrester, my object was entirely friendly. Of course, if it were not, I should approach you in a different way, without giving you the chance of making up your mind as to the course you will take, free from any outside pressure, and certain of safety and secrecy."

"Yes, it is uncommonly friendly. I wonder your tendency is not to adopt the young lady's side."

"It is always better to deal, in such matters, with a man than a woman, especially with the man in possession"—and he smiled pleasantly.

"Ha!" ejaculated Forrester, as if something

suddenly penetrated to his understanding, and he remained silent for a moment, gazing thoughtfully at Lionel. "I think I see the object of your visit," he said at length. "I think, too, that you and your mother have proved your belief in this rather remarkable story. Now, before I take the trouble of thinking about it, you must show me something tangible. I shall then hear what you have to propose. We are both men of the world, and can speak plainly—eh?"—looking keenly at him, a slight smile on his lips.

"Exactly," returned Lionel eagerly. "I saw at once you were a fellow one could speak frankly to."

Forrester's carefully chosen words were an immense relief to him. He had been exceedingly nervous about opening up the subject, while his mother's warning rang in his ears, and he half expected to be kicked out by the stern, curt, matter-of-fact master of Wickham Hall.

"You think so?" replied Forrester abruptly, anxious to draw him out and ascertain how much he knew.

"What do you consider tangible?" returned Lionel.

"Before I enter into the affair with you," said Forrester, "I must see the certificate and the letters you say you have found; besides these, a good deal more is needed before I can admit a doubt as to my rights. I'll not give up easily what I can hold."

"Of course not; you would be a fool if you did. I can only say that if, with a due regard to my own interests, I can help you, I shall gladly."

"You are very good. When may I expect to see the documents you mention?"

Lionel thought for an instant.

"The day after to-morrow, about eleven," he said, uttering a silent prayer that he might be able to get hold of the desired papers, for his mother was a formidable obstacle.

"Good!" returned Forrester, rising. "I shall be here."

"Then for the present I will wish you good-morning," said Lionel, also rising and offering his hand; but Forrester had turned away to ring the bell, and did not seem to see it.

"So much for the English honour and pride my mother talks about," said Lionel to him-

self as he descended the stair. I never knew a man rise quicker to the bait than Forrester. He will be glad enough to make things square with me."

"Confounded sneak!" thought Forrester, as he stood looking after his departing visitor. "He is calculating how much he can squeeze out of me for this secret of his. I must get at the truth, though there's not much in it, probably—there can't be. It would be an infernal nuisance, though, if it were true; I should be in an awful fix. But there's no use in anticipating evil. I'll go and have a talk with Wardlaw about it. He is a devilish long-headed old fellow."

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE MAZE.

WHILE these arbiters of her fate fought a duel of wits, Myra herself thought she had touched the lowest depths of her sad destiny. To turn away from the cup of happiness held to her lips by Leyton was more than she could bear without physical as well as mental suffering. Life with him was such a vision of bliss that the mere thought of it was enough to float her into elysium. But she must resist. Mrs. Dallas was uncompromising in her air of conviction when she asserted that no man—no gentleman—would knowingly wed the daughter of an unmarried mother. Leyton must, therefore, be ignorant of her true position. Of this ignorance she must take no advantage; indeed, she did not feel in the least tempted to do so. To deceive was almost impossible to her, while to explain was even more abhorrent. What! betray the dear father she

had so tenderly loved, the mother she had idealised, to the blame, perhaps the contempt, of any living soul! Never! In her innermost heart she was faithful to them. Some error, some fatality for which they were not quite accountable, lay at the root of this wrong-doing; and all she wished was to shield her dear ones from contumely. As she would have given her life for them were they with her, so she would give up happiness to guard their memory.

But the blow cost her dear. She longed to tell Leyton how much she loved him; to excuse herself for the unhappiness she had caused him, though that would not last—he would find so many to love him. But she *would* like him to know that her refusal was not prompted by caprice or indifference.

Rarely has a young, delicate spirit been called upon to endure more cruel agony; and the future had so little hope to offer. She must always be alone.

She must be resolute. Work—even the work she loved, even the humble independence she had looked forward to earn—had lost all attraction.

Nothing was worth while striving for. Her heart was left to her desolate. Why, why must she live?

She hardly cared to open a letter from Leyton which reached her a short time after he had gone. It could only bring fresh pain.

"I am going for a short time to the Western Highlands [he wrote]. I want to do some sea and coast sketches. I feel I must be up and doing, or—— [What followed was scratched out.] When I return it will be time enough to settle your Paris plans; for it is not well to begin studio work before September, and I think you are fairly comfortable where you are. You must still give me the privileges of a guardian, and let me help you—it will be a pleasure for me if I can. Trust me still. I will be your friend, if I can be nothing more, in any way. I am always yours,

"J. LEYTON."

This letter ought to have comforted Myra; but it did not. Nothing could just then—she was physically ill.

Trying to sketch one damp day in the ruins—for she did not like Miss Foley to think that she would do nothing now Jack Leyton was gone—she caught a chill, and grew quickly feverish. Her head

ached ; she could not eat or sleep. For a day or two Miss Letitia strove in vain to rout the enemy with her old-fashioned remedies—hot gruel at night, herb tea, mustard poultices, etc.—but in vain.

The principal medical man in Redworth was summoned. He looked very grave, asked many questions, ordered the patient to bed, but gave her two anxious friends no very clear information. Next day the poor young sufferer was wandering in mind, and only recognised at intervals where she was ; while another twenty-four hours saw her quite oblivious of everything save confused memories of her early days at Munich ; while her pulse beat terribly fast, and feverish symptoms rapidly developed.

The fight between youth and disease had begun, and for many days the result was uncertain.

* * * * *

Though Lionel Ashby, when in a state of anger and thoroughly roused, threw all fear of his mother, all proper respect for her, to the winds, he was, in his calmer moods, somewhat in awe of her ; and had he possessed any means of obtaining the documents

of which he boasted the possession to Forrester, he would unhesitatingly have stolen them. This was impossible. He might have "lifted" the box containing them, but before twelve hours were over Mrs. Dallas would have been on his track.

Making a virtue of necessity, he described, with an air of the greatest frankness, his interview with Forrester, exaggerating the symptoms of his readiness to jump at Lionel's offer of concealment.

She was very angry—even alarmed.

"How dare you do this without my knowledge and consent?" she cried. "You have endangered any chance we had by letting Forrester know the truth. You have put the game in his hands. Without making any bargain with you, he has only to improve the good impression he must already have made on Myra by his generosity and marry her. Then he can snap his fingers at you and enjoy his wealth, untrammelled by blackmail in any shape. You are really a hot-headed idiot, and enough to anger even so foolish a mother as I am."

"Thank you," returned Lionel sharply. "I saw the man as well as heard him speak, and I can tell you he is thoroughly shaken. He wants to keep the

whole property to himself, and he is ready to pay me my price; but I must prove my position—I must show him the certificates both of marriage and birth, the letters, and——”

“I suppose you may as well. Having begun the foolery, you will have to go on with it; but for heaven’s sake do not give up your papers without an equivalent!”

“Trust me for that, mother!” cried Lionel with alacrity, thankful to have, so far, succeeded.

“And bring them safely back to me. I have a list of them, which I will copy and give to you. I shall only give you a copy of the cutting from the *Times* and the Italian paper describing the railway accident and death of the first husband; those must be kept with jealous care: if lost or destroyed it would be very difficult to establish Myra’s legitimacy.”

“All right, mother. It might be best. What sum ought I to ask for my secret?”

“I don’t know. You must feel your way. If he intends to keep the affair dark, why it is worth his while to pay heavily.”

“It certainly is; but he will be an idiot if he

does not secure both the girl and the money without your help."

"We will see," said Lionel with a happy smile.

The result of the next interview between Forrester and Lionel was a prolongation of preliminaries. The former read the various documents with an inscrutable countenance, and in reply to some suggestive remarks from Lionel, asked with brutal abruptness, "Come, tell me at once, how much do you want for this lot?"

"That is not for me to say," said Lionel with an air of polite forbearance. "You know best what these papers are worth to you; and I am sure your sense of justice——"

"Is equal to yours, eh?" interrupted Forrester, looking hard at him with a curious expression. "Well, I will tell you what I consider they are worth to me when I have consulted with my solicitor."

"What!" cried Lionel aghast. "You are not going to trust such a secret to anyone?"

"If solicitors are not greatly belied," returned Forrester with a grim smile, "they are just the gentry to be trusted with a piece of robbery of this kind!"

"Not a very courteous expression," said Lionel, his face darkening.

"Why? You and I can afford to speak honestly to each other," remarked Forrester drily.

"You will observe that in this stage of the business I cannot part with these documents," said Lionel.

"No, I do not suppose you will. Now we can have no more to say to each other at present, Mr. Ashby; as soon as I am prepared to say what I shall propose, I'll write to you. Good-morning, Mr. Ashby!" Hastily gathering up his documents and thrusting them into a breast pocket, Lionel beat a retreat.

As soon as the door had closed upon his visitor Forrester sat down, and drawing his writing materials to him, made some notes carefully and rapidly. Folding up the sheet of paper on which he had written, he placed it in his note-book, and that in his pocket. Then he wrote a note: "Dear Wardlaw, —Dine with me to-day, or let me dine with you. I want to take counsel on various points."

"Send this to Mr. Wardlaw at once, and get me an answer," he said to the man who answered the

bell. Forrester continued to write and make calculations till his valet appeared. "Mr. Wardlaw has gone out of town, sir," he said. "Your note will be forwarded."

"What an infernal nuisance! Call a hansom, I am late." A quick order to the driver, "Lincoln's Inn, sharp!" and he was whirled away to a consultation with his solicitor.

Wardlaw, on receipt of this note, returned to London sooner than he would otherwise have done; nevertheless, it was some little time before Forrester and his ex-guardian met. Then they dined together at the latter's apartments.

"Now, tell me your tale," said Wardlaw, pushing the claret towards his guest, when dinner was over and they were alone.

"I begin to fear it is a tragedy for me," returned Cecil filling his glass. "That young scoundrel, Ashby, turned up again the day I wrote to you, with a packet of papers, which he let me look through, but would not leave in my hands. There was the certificate of a marriage between Frederic Dallas and Angela Cevasco, widow, in October, 1865, at St. Jude's Church, Kensington; another of the birth of

a daughter named Myra some months later ; cuttings from an Italian paper, describing a bad accident on the line between Genoa and Milan on the 2nd September, 1865, with the names of those killed—among whom was that of Filippo Cevasco, silk and velvet manufacturer, of Genoa ; there was a letter or statement from Frederic Dallas, declaring that this Cevasco was the first husband of his wife Angela, who had been obliged to fly from his cruelty, and that, immediately on hearing of Cevasco's death, he started from Venice with his wife for England, for the purpose of having their marriage solemnised and registered. They remained in London till after the birth of their daughter, and then returned to the Continent."

"It looks bad," ejaculated Wardlaw ; "but it has yet to be proved that this Cevasco was really the husband of Myra's mother."

"Yes, that is the point. My solicitors have sent an agent to Genoa to ascertain particulars. I believe the house of Cevasco still exists, though it is more than twenty years ago since all this occurred. So far the story bears inspection. The marriage is duly entered in the books of St. Jude's Church. They

have found the house where Dallas lodged and the child was born ; and if Cevasco proves to have been the man who married Angela Henne (Henne was the mother's maiden name), why I must hand over my property to my pensioner, Myra Dallas."

"It's deuced hard on you, Cecil, deuced hard. But I suppose it can't be helped."

"No, of course not; but that's a poor consolation!"

"How is it that Fred Dallas did not tell his story to his brother?"

"Oh, it seems they had quarrelled about Fred's connection with this woman, and had held no communication for sixteen or seventeen years. When, on his way back from India, Colonel Dallas sought out his brother, it was too late, Frederic was at the point of death." Silence succeeded for a few moments when Forrester ceased to speak.

"Then you do not think of resisting the claims of Miss Dallas?"

"No! if the inquiry at Genoa proves the Cevasco killed in that railway accident to have been the first husband of Myra's mother, certainly not! I have a character to lose; and I am not particularly

anxious to enrich the lawyers. But I hope she will not call on me to refund the money I have spent!"

"What! after the consideration you have shown for *her*?"

"It all depends on her advisers; she has hardly a will of her own, I fancy. When I know what they have found out in Genoa (if it is favourable to Myra), she ought to have a legal adviser of her own, and prove her rights in a friendly suit. It might save difficulties hereafter."

"Yes, it might," said Wardlaw thoughtfully.

"Perhaps the best and fairest thing to do would be to marry her," resumed Forrester in a candid tone, and with an air of willing self-sacrifice. "She would get a husband—not a bad one, I flatter myself—in addition to a fortune; and she could settle a good slice, or the whole of it if she likes, on *me*."

Wardlaw smiled. "She may not fancy you."

"Why? there is nothing to dislike in me. And, do you know, that girl is not a bad sort; I think I could put up with her very well. Eh, what do you think?"

"That you are a wonderful young man," returned Wardlaw with a curious smile.

"Oh, come now! not wonderful. I *have* some sense of right and wrong, and I'm not going to disgrace myself by double-dealing. However, I shall do nothing hastily. As to that fellow, Ashby, I think I'll get Grove to write him an official sort of letter, informing him that I am much obliged for his information, but whether it proves Miss Dallas heir to the wealth of our late relative or not, it puts me in no way under any obligation to him; that he can give or withhold the documents he showed me as he likes, and therefore I can see no necessity for another meeting, which would probably be painful to both parties. That will turn his flank, eh? By Jove, if he comes near me again, I shall kick him downstairs."

"Then I hope he will not! How soon do you expect to hear the result of your mission to Genoa?"

"It is uncertain, perhaps at the end of next week. I'll have a deuced uncomfortable time, I can tell you, until I know how matters go. Gad, I've got rid of between eight and nine thousand of the cash.

what with one thing and another ; if Myra Dallas is advised to demand this money back, I shall be done in earnest ! She had much better marry me than ruin me."

"If there is any truth in a face, she will not exact the last farthing."

"Don't you be too sure. It all depends on what sort of an adviser she will get."

There was another pause. Then Wardlaw suddenly asked, "Have you seen Leyton?"

"No, not for a few weeks. Somebody said he was out of town."

"If I were you," resumed Wardlaw, "I should write and ascertain his whereabouts. *He* would be the man to advise Miss Dallas. He is a good man and true, and would be a friend to both of you."

"Very likely, but she had better take me as adviser-in-chief."

"My dear fellow, you are too deeply interested to——"

"What?" interrupted Forrester, "do you mean to say I would not give her disinterested advice, even if she *does* kick me out?"

"Your intentions might be excellent, but the position would be difficult."

"I don't see that. Anyhow, I'll write to Leyton ; I suppose his letters are forwarded."

"I should wait the result of your inquiries at Genoa, and then write."

"Ay ! it's as well to keep the affair quiet till I know my ground. It's an infernal business if I am to lose the fortune after so short a spell of it !"

"Not if you get it back with interest in the shape of a nice wife."

"Interest ! Incumbrance, you mean !" exclaimed Forrester. "I don't want to marry for these ten years. Why the deuce fellows want to run their heads into the matrimonial noose I cannot tell. However, as I said before, if the worst comes to the worst, I shouldn't object so much to Myra Dallas, and it would be far and away the best mode of settling the matter."

Forrester was as good as his word.

After many days of impatient waiting, rendered still more unpleasant by Mrs. Dallas's gloomy looks and ominous ^{*}silence, the spell was broken by a thunderbolt, in the shape of a lawyer's letter, em-

bodying the ideas sketched by Forrester in his talk with Wardlaw; while to Ashby's eyes the word "Defeat" seemed blazoned all over it in letters of fire.

He opened it at breakfast, and could not suppress the word "Damnation!" uttered with a kind of despairing yell.

A hasty demand for explanation from Mrs. Dallas was answered by a frantic outburst of despair and fury; while he walked the room, throwing himself upon the sofa, only to start up again and resume his pacing to and fro.

His mother picked up the letter he had flung from him, and read it with a bitter smile.

"You have reaped a rich harvest from your contempt of my counsels!" she said.

"Don't!" he cried, pausing opposite to her, a dangerous look in his flaming eyes, "I am half mad already. Don't drive me to—to hurt you."

She was silent, and began to re-peruse the letter, while her son raved.

"The cowardly, lying cur," he cried, "to lead me on, to cheat me, and then not dare to face me! He has cheated me of my information, and flung me

away when he squeezed me dry. Is that an English gentleman's sense of honour? Is that the high principle *you* talk about?"

"He does not consider himself bound to you in any way. Oh, Lionel, I wish to heaven you had listened to me, and not acted with such fatal precipitation. You have only enriched that miserable, ungrateful girl, who will make a mock of you. Oh, my son, bad, unkind as you have been, I cannot help feeling for you—I cannot bear to see you beaten. Turn to me now—I will help you. It will be a tremendous effort to re-establish ourselves, our characters, after such a failure as this—for of course I shall be classed with you—but I see a ray of light, and I will help you."

She paused, unable to command her voice, her heart beating with deadly hatred for Myra, rage against Forrester, despair at the false step taken by Lionel, and suddenly-awakened compassion for him.

"There is no one like you, after all, mother," exclaimed Lionel, throwing his arms round her. "I was a fool to go against you; but help me now and I will stick to you. Help me to revenge."

"Let us make our own position secure first," she replied, kissing him with unusual warmth. "The rest may come after. Try and be calm and resolute. Sit down—take a cup of coffee while I think."

"I couldn't swallow it without a dash of cognac."

Mrs. Dallas went to the sideboard and took out the desired addition; and, sitting down, poured out coffee for her son and for herself, though she added milk only to hers. She was very silent for some minutes; then she rang, and, while the servant cleared away, seemed absorbed in the morning paper.

"Now, listen to me, Lionel," she exclaimed when they were alone. "Sit down and gather your senses together. I presume you gave Forrester to understand that you did not mean to give him the proofs of Myra's legitimacy for nothing?"

"Yes; of course I did."

"You were quite alone with him?"

"Quite alone, both times."

"Very well—one man's word is as good as another's. We must tell our tale resolutely and

consistently. Here it is. First, we have only just found these documents suggesting Myra's legitimacy. My husband's papers were so voluminous that I naturally postponed looking through those belonging to my brother-in-law till the other day. Then, being deeply interested in Myra, you, in a fit of generous enthusiasm, imprudently went off to Forrester, hoping to talk him into restoring the property to Myra or dividing it with her, thus avoiding the cost of a lawsuit and much unpleasantness. Next, you must write a temperate, high-toned letter to these lawyers, protesting against their insinuation that you expected anything for your information, and recapitulating the motives I have set forth. You shall express your astonishment that Captain Forrester—himself an honourable man—should have strangely misinterpreted you. We will get this story well into our heads and stick to it. We must never use any word but 'misrepresentation,' but we can so use it that it may spell 'lie.' Believe me, if you can raise a sufficient dust of indistinctness, and are safe from corroborating witnesses, you may defy 'the powers that be' to prove anything. Some will swear by Forrester, and some by us. But no one can

know; and we have as good a right to be heard and believed as our antagonists. Now do you see the game?"

"Yes, perfectly. Then, when quite re-established, we can see what we can do to pay out Myra. I hate her! How I hate her! I wish I had her in my grasp. By the way, mother, do you think there is any chance that the fellow we sent to Genoa may peach?"

"No—none. He scarcely knew anything as to why I wanted the information, and was a commonplace creature. Now, Lionel, get your writing things. The letter to these lawyers requires infinite care. I am a little undecided whether I shall write to Lady Shirland or wait till I go down to Glenusquebaugh next week." (A pause.) "I think I will write. She will be enchanted with the gossip, and there is nothing like having the first word. Then I shall say a good deal about you, and—— Stay. Send a judicious little note yourself to Dorothea. Say that you are in despair at being left alone here; and Forrester has behaved in a most extraordinary manner—it is best to begin it; that you know *she* was interested in Myra, and through Myra in you.

Talk of your value for her opinion, and ask for a word of sympathy. You might mention, too, that you hear Leyton has returned to town; then perhaps you will get an invitation to take his place. If you do, hold it fast; for Dorothea is far gone about him, and may be caught in the rebound. Come! let us ravel this web of circumstances till no living soul can disentangle it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONVALESCENCE.

Is it necessary to trouble the reader with the minutiae respecting the steps taken to ascertain the truth on those points which must be proved in a case of disputed succession? No; they are but a weariness to the flesh. We will, then, only say that the inquiries respecting the history of Filippo Cevasco identified him as the first husband of Myra's mother, to the infinite chagrin of Forrester.

Affairs having progressed so far, there was a pause, a hesitation as to the next step to be taken.

"I don't care to break the news to the young heiress till I see Leyton," said Forrester one morning to Wardlaw, who had dropped in just to find out how things were going on.

"You have written to him, I suppose?"

"Yes, two or three days ago, and I am surprised at having no reply."

"He is away in some inaccessible region on the west coast of Scotland where the postman is unknown."

"Is such a spot to be found nowadays?"

"Yes, occasionally."

"Have you heard anything of young Ashby?"

"Only from Grove, my solicitor, to whom he wrote in reply to their letter. Right cleverly he replied, I can tell you. He had the impudence to say that I entirely misunderstood him; that he never had the slightest intention of putting a price on his information; nothing, in short, was farther from his thoughts. He had come to me, on the discovery of the certificate, merely because, knowing me to be an honourable man, he hoped to bring about a friendly settlement of the affair, and to save the cost of legal proceedings. He could not have taken a better line. It's not my business to denounce him as a double-dealing scoundrel. He'll never presume to cross my path again, so I'll let him go; but——"

He was interrupted by the entrance of Leyton.

who came in hastily and unannounced, looking haggard and ill.

"Leyton!" cried both men together.

"You have had my letter!" added Forrester.

"Yes, just as I was starting, and read it on the road. This is a strange story of yours; yet I have sometimes thought that some such condition of things existed, or Mrs. Dallas would not have urged such a marriage for her son. Now it remains to be seen if this poor young creature will live to enjoy her unexpected fortune. She has had a bad fever, the brain greatly affected, and is still so prostrate that she cannot be considered out of danger."

"That's a bad business," said Forrester, very gravely.

"Bad enough," returned Leyton; "and the stupid people she is with never let me know till almost too late. Then they wrote to me in London, and so lost nearly thirty-six hours. I started the moment I heard, but I was five hours north from Glasgow so I did not reach Redworth till late yesterday."

"Then Miss Dallas is still at Redworth?" put in Wardlaw.

"She is, and well cared for, I believe. The doctor says if her strength can be kept up she will pull through, but it is still touch-and-go."

"I trust in God she will!" cried Forrester heartily, "even though she lives to beggar me. It would be too melancholy to think of such a bright young creature passing away with good fortune within her grasp. By Jove, I hope she'll live to marry me. That will be the best solution of the difficulty, eh, Leyton?"

Leyton started and flashed a look of angry surprise at him. "For you—certainly," he said.

"She has youth on her side, and you say good care, so we have every right to hope the best," observed Wardlaw, who had been watching Leyton; and said to himself, "He is hard hit, poor fellow!"

Leyton kept silence, while Forrester plunged into a description of his interviews with Lionel Ashby, of his hunt for the history of Cevasco, of the undoubted proofs of Myra's legitimacy, etc. Then the conversation naturally turned on the probable eventualities of the startling discovery.

"Of one thing I am quite sure," said Leyton, at length. "Myra Dallas will never take all from

you. She is deeply grateful for the consideration you have shown for her."

"That will depend on her advisers," returned Forrester. "She is an infant, and powerless at present; and she may marry, and her husband will not think much of me or what I have done for his wife."

"Yes," added Wardlaw; "and as soon as her story gets out she will have all the fortune-hunters in London after her."

Leyton muttered something which the others did not catch.

"Well," said Forrester, with a self-satisfied air, "I will do my best to forestall them."

"Nothing can be done at present," said Leyton. "It will be a considerable time before Miss Dallas can be troubled with any matter of business, and long before she can bear any shock. In the meantime it will be well to select a good legal adviser for her. Being a minor, she can do nothing herself."

"Quite true," returned Wardlaw. "Still, her wishes as regards this large inheritance must be consulted."

"Certainly," exclaimed Forrester. "By the way, where are you staying, Leyton?"

"Oh, I shall not leave Redworth till I know that Miss Dallas is safe."

"By the way, how old is she?"

"I have an idea she was twenty in May, but I do not think she knows exactly herself."

"A year to wait for her majority; a great deal may happen in a year," said Forrester thoughtfully. "Then there is no use in asking you to dinner?"

"No, thank you! I have one or two places to call at, and then I shall return to Redworth; so I will say good-morning."

"Good-morning! very glad you are within reach. I am thinking of running down to Wickham myself. You'll let me have a line to-morrow, to say how my cousin is going on?"

"Without fail," returned Leyton, with a cynical smile at this sudden recognition of Myra's relationship.

"Good-bye, my dear fellow; my best wishes for the recovery of your ward, as I am sure she will consider herself," from Wardlaw.

Leyton walked rapidly away, greatly disturbed

in mind. His journey south had been a terrible trial. The idea of Myra dying, breathing her last, perhaps, before he could catch one look of recognition from her haunting eyes, one last faint smile from her sweet, sad mouth! and she would want him in that supreme moment, he felt—he knew she would. There was some barrier which he did not recognise between them, for there was no indifference in the voice which uttered her denial of his suit; two or three weeks ago she had been so unaffectedly happy to be with him, yet might not that indicate sisterly feeling only? How frank and natural she was! how infinitely interesting from her loneliness, and the strain of tender resignation which was the dominant chord of her character. And now—was death to rob him of his beloved bride, for whom his soul yearned? if—if only he could see her, could assure himself of her condition with his own eyes!

If she escaped—if she were restored to life and health, how would it be? Could he, a poor painter, with a past far from irreproachable, venture to ask an heiress, a woman above him in riches and in character, to turn from the prosperous suitors who would,

no doubt, flock round her and wed poverty and obscurity? No, honour forbade! He was the most unfortunate devil on the face of the earth. If Myra had but accepted him when she was poor, obscure, with the stigma of illegitimacy on her birth, all might have been well; but she had said, "No!" He must not deceive himself; she had some strong objection to him, or she would not have declined to share his home. Yet how was he to account for her extraordinary despondency? This was, the doctor told him, the greatest obstacle to Myra's recovery. "She does not seem to care for life," he said. "It is a very bad symptom." Pondering deeply this unyouthful tendency, an idea suggested itself to Leyton, which seized his imagination so forcibly that he paused in the crowded street to look at it with steadfast mental eyes.

"I'll go and speak to Mrs. Keene; she may help me to unravel the mystery." He called a hansom, and was soon bowling along to Keene's Hotel.

"Dear, dear! Is it you, Mr. Leyton?" cried the good landlady. "I am glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Keene! I wish you would

tell me why you did not send for me sooner. Illness! Why, good God! Miss Dallas might have died before I could come back!"

"Well, sir, it was a bit of a mistake. You see, my poor sisters, who were just broken-hearted about her, they did know as how you were her guardian in a manner of speaking, and I thought they had written; and I was so taken up and worried about the dear young lady I lost my head a bit, but I got her a trained nurse and everything I could——"

"Yes, I know you did, and I am here in time, thank God! Now I want to consult you about an idea that has occurred to me. The last day she—Miss Dallas was here, how did she seem?"

"Just like a dazed creature that could hardly keep its feet. It's my belief that the aunt said something terribly cruel to her."

"Exactly so. Did you ever know or hear there were doubts that—that Mr. and Mrs. Dallas were married?"

"No, sir, but Keene did. He told me, and not a word has ever passed my lips; I don't and won't believe the cruel story. If ever there was an angel on this earth, it was Miss Myra's mother."

“ Well, Mrs. Keene, she was much more sinned against than sinning ; and there is no doubt she was legally and religiously married a considerable time before Miss Dallas was born—a very important matter, as you will hear later on. Now I am disposed to think that, as a revenge, Mrs. Dallas told Myra of her illegitimacy, and convinced her of it in some way. This blow was too much for a delicate, refined girl with a tender memory of her parents, and may account for the terrible depression by which her recovery is retarded.”

“ Gracious goodness, Mr. Leyton ! I am sure you are right ! I shall never forget the misery of her face that day when she walked in here looking fit to drop, and just fell on that sofa. If ever there was a cruel, scheming devil, it's Mrs. Dallas—and what shall we do now, sir ? ”

Leyton was silent. Indeed, he hardly heard Mrs. Keene ; he was asking himself if this could be the reason of Myra's rejection of himself. If so, why, there were possibilities of infinite happiness still before him, only—this dreadful fortune would come between them, must come between them !

“ I was saying, sir,” resumed Mrs. Keene, who

had been watching him with interest, "what's to be done now?"

"Eh, what's to be done?" repeated Leyton, looking up. "I scarcely know. The great thing would be to convince her that her mother was all right; she needn't know the exact story. Look here, Mrs. Keene, *you* would be just the right person to tell her. It's a subject *I* dare not open up to her. Will you undertake it as soon as she is strong enough to bear being talked to?"

"Ay, that I will. She must have suffered terribly. What a hard life she has had, poor dear, and all from the faults of others."

Leyton muttered something, and took a turn to and fro.

"Yes," he said, resuming his seat—"that's the plan. You tell her it was a base lie on the part of Mrs. Dallas; then, when she is able to see me, I'll tell her of the great change in her fortunes; for the proof of her legitimacy makes her an heiress."

"You don't say so, Mr. Leyton! An heiress? Why, how is that, sir?"

Leyton gave her a hasty explanation, at which the good woman's eyes danced with joy.

“Don’t talk about this at present, if you please, Mrs. Keene. It will be blazoned about soon enough if—if Myra recovers. I am so infinitely obliged to you for sending down a good nurse. Your sister says she has been of the greatest use. I will write to-night, or telegraph to-morrow morning, or as soon as the doctor thinks Miss Dallas may be spoken to on such a matter. He told me he thought she must have had a severe nervous shock. By heaven! if we are right in our surmises, I’ll give that Mrs. Dallas a piece of my mind before I have done with her.”

“You may depend on my prudence, sir. Not a word shall pass my lips—not even to Wilhelmina or grandfather.”

“I am sure I can depend on you, Mrs. Keene,” returned Leyton, rising. “You shall hear from me with a full report of our sufferer to-morrow morning.”

After a cordial “Good-bye” Leyton departed.

* * * * *

Youth and an untried constitution were too much for the foe—a somewhat complicated attack of fever.

Myra slowly rallied. A few days after Leyton's visit to Mrs. Keene, he was permitted to summon that true friend to make the experiment from which they both hoped so much.

"Thank God, she has had two good nights; and Miss Foley reports her much improved in consequence," said Leyton, who met Mrs. Keene at the railway station. "But I am sure I need not warn you to be cautious in approaching the subject. If, however, I am right in my conjecture that she is brooding over the story told her by Mrs. Dallas, the relief of knowing it to be false will be enormous."

On reaching Miss Foley's establishment, the devoted Letitia, who was as constant in her attentions to the invalid as if she had had no other nurse, took possession of her sister, who, declining any refreshment, was taken upstairs at once.

"Oh, my dear," whispered Letitia, pausing half-way, "it has been an awful time. One night I thought she would never see morning, poor dear. She was wandering; and all her talk was of Mr. Leyton.

"‘Don't let Jack come back,’ she would say.

‘He is better away. He doesn’t know; and he must never know.’ And then she’d think she was in Germany, and talk a lot I couldn’t understand—German, I suppose. Now she is more herself. She said one day—‘Why—why did you bring me back to life? I have nothing to live for—nothing.’”

Then, lowering her voice, Letitia continued—

“It’s my belief they’ve had an awful quarrel. I am sure he’s in love with her, if she is not in love with him. He did go on at sister and me for not sending for him before. Now, you stay here a minute till I see if she is ready to see you.”

The tears would come when Mrs. Keene looked at the pale face, the large blue eyes—larger than they ever looked before—that sought hers with such imploring sadness. The slight form scarcely showed beneath the bedclothes, and one nearly transparent, white hand lay upon the counterpane. The room was beautifully neat, and a vase of flowers stood upon the chimney-piece. A stout, elderly, sensible-looking woman sat by the window, some needlework in her hands.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Keene softly, “I am thankful to be let see you again.”

"Oh, I have wanted you so much," murmured Myra, making a feeble effort to draw her down and kiss her. "You will stay a little now?"

"Aye, that I will," taking the chair brought forward by the nurse and leaving her hand in the weak grasp of both Myra's.

The nurse took her work and left the room.

"But I have been to see you more than once, my dear."

"Have you? Yes—I think I remember."

"And you are feeling a little better—a little stronger?"

"I am." A deep sigh. "I shall live for ever so many years now."

"That's right."

"No; it isn't right, dear Mrs. Keene. I have nothing to live for."

"Yes, you have—if you knew but all; and I have come down to tell you."

"Ah!"—with a deep sigh—"I know all; and that is why I am too weary to care for life."

"Just see, my dearie, what good kind friends you have. There's my sister regular doting on you and me, and Captain Forrester, and that good Mr.

Leyton come back all the way from Scotland to watch over you——”

“Hush!” whispered Myra, and turned her face away.

“Tell me, missie, do you think you could answer a few questions if I ask them?”

“Yes, I am much stronger.”

“Well, my dear young lady, would you mind telling me what it was Mrs. Dallas said to you—the day you went to see her—that upset you?”

“No, not that, anything but that,” returned Myra, her pale cheeks flushing.

“If I tell you what I think it was, will you say whether I am right or wrong?”

“I will; but you will never guess.”

“I’ll try. Did she tell you a horrid lie about your father and mother not being properly married?”

“She told me that; but, alas! it was no lie!” returned Myra, the big tears rolling down her white face.

“It was!” cried Mrs. Keene vehemently. “They were *not* rightly married at the first going off, but afterwards they were married as close and true as the queen herself! You were not born for a good

while after! It's proved, my dear, and you are going to get a large fortune because your parents were married!"

"Is this true? Oh, if it were! But I dare not believe it. It is too—too good to be true."

"It is real truth, and you'll know it is when you are able to get up and hear all about the fortune that is coming to you. Your blessed mother was married to your father in St. Jude's Church, Kensington, and you were baptised there about a year after; and when you are able to get up and travel, you shall come there with me, and see it with your own eyes!"

"I shall see it with my own eyes? you—you promise me this!" cried Myra with such a lightening up of her face, such a sudden strong effort to sit up, that Mrs. Keene was frightened at the effect of her own words.

"Oh! missie, dear, do lie down and comfort your heart! You can look the world in the face, and take your stand as Miss Dallas. No one can gainsay it."

Myra sank back on the pillow, and covered her eyes with her hand; her lips moved as if in prayer, and there were a few moments of profound silence.

Then she raised her arms inviting an embrace, which was most cordially bestowed.

“Who told you?” she whispered, still clinging to Mrs. Keene’s neck.

“Mr. Leyton.”

“And was it the first of it he knew?”

“To be sure it was! Do you think he would have kept such news to himself a minute longer than he could help?”

Myra smiled and bent her head. She did not quite take in Mrs. Keene’s meaning; she understood from her friend’s speech that Leyton had always thought her legitimate, and had heard of the doubt, the solution, and the strange chance of her (Myra) having inherited a fortune, at the same moment.

“Now, missie, my dear, you must have some nourishment; and try to get a little sleep, for I am afraid I have upset you with all this talk.”

“You have given me new life, dear Mrs. Keene! But I will do whatever you desire. I want to get well quickly—very quickly. Tell me, when did you see Mr. Leyton?”

“This morning, just before I came up to you!”

“What! is he here?”

“Yes, to be sure he is, poor dear gentleman! He was just raging with us all for not letting him know sooner how ill you were.”

“He is very kind and good,” murmured Myra, and closed her eyes.

Mrs. Keene rang for the nurse, who brought the patient's beef-tea. Then the bearer of these good tidings of great joy slipped quietly away, nurse took her needlework, and Myra closed her eyes, and gave herself up to such visions of coming bliss as have rarely chased away the black despondency of a despairing heart.

If Leyton loved her, as he said he did, there was no obstacle to their happiness. If, instead of being an encumbrance and a disgrace, she was of unstained birth, and sufficiently provided for—her belief in the story of “a fortune” was very limited—what joy to share Jack Leyton's life and be more a help than a hindrance. Should she see him soon? and read in his eyes the delicious assurance that she was dear to him? To Myra's nature love was a positive necessity; without it, wealth and power and magnificence would have meant starvation, and for five long years her heart

had been dying by inches ! God was too good, too bountiful to her : how could she ever show sufficient gratitude for all the benefits He had poured upon her ? No thought of herself—of her own deserving, or non-deserving, crossed her mind ; she never troubled about herself. So she passed from these heavenly dreams into profound and balmy sleep.

The old doctor, who had shown deep interest in his patient, found her wonderfully improved next day.

“Why, young lady,” he said, when he had felt her pulse and looked at her tongue, “you’ve been imbibing some elixir of life. You are pounds better this morning.”

“Yes !” she returned with a smile so sweet and bright that the doctor remembered it for many a day. “I have had such good news !”

“I should say you had. Well, Miss Foley,” to the devoted Letitia, “if this improvement continues, she may get up and lie on the sofa here to-morrow, and perhaps be carried down to the drawing-room the day after. I am always anxious to get my patients out of their sick-room. Good-morning, my dear Take plenty of nourishment, and keep very quiet.”

“She is rallying much quicker than I expected,” he continued as he descended the stairs, followed obsequiously by Letitia. “She is not what you call robust, but she has a capital constitution. Don’t let her hear any bad news if you can help it; some nervous shock laid her low, another one might finish her! I’ll be here about 10.30 to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

YES OR NO.

WHEN at last the doctor informed Leyton that there was no reason why he should not see and converse with Myra, the ardently-wished-for permission caused him as much disturbance as pleasure. How would she receive him? How would she look at him? He fancied he should be able to see at a glance whether her refusal had been prompted by a too sensitive consciousness of her position or a real objection to become his wife. In either case he was in a cleft stick. If she wished to dismiss him finally, he could hardly act as her adviser—intercourse with her would be too painful. If she had a secret liking for him, he must hold back; he must not entangle her in an engagement which would be considered detrimental by most sensible people. She ought to have time to realise her own position and judge between his and the

various offers which, no doubt, would be made to her. But above all these considerations towered the engrossing thought—"To-morrow I shall see her; I shall look into her eyes and hold her hand in mine."

It was a fine, cloudless, warm day—but warm with a dry, healthy heat—when Leyton was ushered into Myra's presence. She was almost reclining in an easy chair, and wore a pretty morning-gown of lilac and white; a lilac ribbon passed round her head helped to keep up the loose mass of her hair, which he was thankful to see had been spared. Her eyes looked larger than formerly; she seemed transparently pale and fair, while her naturally slight form appeared too frail to be touched. The delicate colour rose in her cheeks as she held out a thin hand to him without a word. He too found it hard to speak as he took and kissed it reverently.

"I hardly hoped to find you so well," he said huskily. "I trust my coming will not be too much for you?"

"It will do me good," she returned in a low, weak voice, as she leant back languidly. "I wanted so much to see you—to thank you."

She smiled kindly, but did not raise her eyes.

“You have nothing to thank me for, Myra. The good fortune which has come to you has come through your enemy, or lover—they are sometimes convertible terms—Ashby. He discovered some papers which proved the legality of your father and mother’s marriage. There had been some doubts about this,” he added hurriedly, anxious to spare her pain and avoid her questions. “I am not sure that Ashby had your welfare at heart in the matter; but, at all events, he told the tale to Forrester, who made all necessary inquiries, the upshot of which is that you are really the heir of old George Dallas, and Forrester will have to hand over the fortune to you.”

“What!” exclaimed Myra, “and that beautiful place?”

“No; not Wickham Hall—that’s his own. But he must refund the sums he has spent upon it.”

“Then he will not have much money?”

“If you insist on his paying back the money he has spent he will be beggared.”

“Jack,”—raising herself in her chair—“do you think I would do this?”

“Well, no; but, Myra, you must do nothing without proper legal advice. We have found you a most respectable adviser, and, as soon as you are able to see him, you will explain your wishes, and things can be formally arranged.”

“But can’t *you* advise me?”

“Not in a matter of this kind. Moreover, you are, or must be made, a ward in Chancery, and can do nothing till you are of age.”

“Until I am twenty-one? That is in a year. I was twenty in May or June—I am not sure. Hedwig always gave me flowers in June; but my father said I was born in May. A year will go quickly; then I will not take all this money from Captain Forrester, who was so good to me when I had nothing. He has been accustomed to riches and needs riches; I have always been poor, and I do not want this kind of wealth. Would *you* like me to rob Captain Forrester of everything?”

“Well, no, Myra. He is an extremely honourable, straightforward fellow; but you must do nothing quixotic—nothing without the lawyer’s advice.”

“Do you think I want to give him the whole?

No, indeed—only part. If it were but to prove my right, about which I am very jealous, I shall keep some. And, oh, how wonderful it all seems! Are you quite well, Jack? You look pale, and your eyes are sad. You must not be ill as I was. I nearly died—I knew it. I could not move; but I knew they were all crying round me.”

“Hush!” exclaimed Leyton with a quick gesture of the hand, “I cannot bear it.”

“Oh! but *I* was glad. I thought that all the pain and bitterness was nearly over; that I was going where there was what I never could find on earth—a place for me.” She stopped; for Leyton turned away and covered his face with his hand for a moment. “But”—with a change of voice—“I want to live now; I want to get well quickly—quickly; to go out and see the dear sun—the lovely, beautiful earth.”

“God grant you many bright, happy days!” said Leyton, recovering himself. “Now, am I not staying too long? You are looking flushed; your eyes are too bright; I am tiring you.”

“Oh, no, no! Jack, dear Jack, *I* have something to tell you—something to show you.” She drew a

letter from her pocket, and gave it to him, adding, "It is from Mrs. Dallas."

"What has she to say for herself?"

"My DEAR MYRA,—" [he began].

"No, no ! do not read it aloud," she exclaimed.

Leyton obeyed.

"I address you [the letter proceeded] in consequence of the extraordinary facts which have just come to light, and fearing that the inimical feeling which (Heaven only knows why) appears to have developed in your mind towards my son and myself might lead you to misconstrue circumstances. Having had so much to distress me in the sad task of regulating and perusing my dear husband's letters and papers, I naturally postponed the examination of your father's, partly with the intention of consigning them to your care when you came of age. Lionel, however, thought that this might be a painful ordeal for you, and at his suggestion I permitted him to look through them. You will by this time have heard the result. With the best motive he carried the proofs of your legitimacy to the man who has usurped your place, again hoping to spare you, while he made some terms satisfactory to both parties. He has had his reward in the insults heaped upon him, which will, no doubt, rebound on those whose incapacity to understand his disinterestedness prompted their conduct. I now write to say that a small sum of about £3,000, the

wreck of your father's capital, naturally fell into his brother's possession, your claim not being supposed to exist. I am anxious to restore this sum to you, and beg you will give me instructions whom I can remit it to. Had I had the least idea of the real state of affairs, it should have been yours long ago. Looking for your reply, I am, yours faithfully,—JUDITH DALLAS."

"Good heavens!" cried Leyton when he had finished this epistle. "That woman lies like truth."

"Then you do not believe her?" asked Myra.

"Do you?"

"Well, no, Jack, I cannot. Yet I would not act harshly towards her. You know she was kind to me when I was staying in her house; and in trying to marry me to her son, she did not think or know she was cruel, so——"

"My dear Myra! do you mean to say that you would let her keep the fruits of her robbery? She robbed you of this money, and only offered you a wretched pittance to fence her own baseness! You must not be weak. You may be very sure your uncle—who ought to have secured you by will—left some injunctions as to providing for you. No! in this matter you must be guided by the advice of your solicitor."

"Well, Jack, I will listen to what you and he say."

"Thank you, Myra! believe me, you will not regret it. Another matter must be attended to at once; we must find a suitable residence for you as soon as you are able to move. I daresay you would rather stay with these good souls, but I fear it would not do."

"I shall do as you advise, Jack," she murmured; she was growing very tired.

"I see you are done up, and I will go. I must run up to town to-morrow, both on your account and my own."

"You are too good to me," she said softly, and half put out her hand, but was drawing it back, when Leyton took it gently and held it. How delightful it was to feel the clasp of his!

"You know I ask nothing better than to serve you," he returned with something of sad composure in his voice. "I shall write and let you know what we are doing for you, as I shall not return for two or three days. Now I must not stay any longer. By-the-bye, Forrester, who is staying down here, wishes to see you as soon as you can receive him!"

"I should like to see him. He may come the day after to-morrow; if I feel weaker I can put him off. Let him come about three, I shall have had a little sleep then."

"Very well. Good-bye, then, my dear ward! You must look on me still as your guardian." He kissed the hand he still held.

"Come back soon!" murmured Myra, the tears gathering in her eyes; she would have kept him if she could. Why was he so gently composed? why had he so changed from the impassioned lover to the quiet, considerate friend? Did he think she had refused to be his wife because she did not love him! Was true, real happiness about to slip from her grasp, and leave her only the dust and ashes of fortune and position?

"Dear, dear Miss Myra! this will never do!" cried Letitia when she came in a few minutes after; "you'll make yourself ill crying like that! Why, whatever can a nice gentleman like Mr. Leyton have said to vex you?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing. He is far too kind and good to vex me; but I am tired and upset, though thankful, too; do not mind me, dear friend."

“ Here, let me bathe your head with a little eau-de-Cologne and water ; there’s nothing like it for the headache, and then you shall have your dinner—a nice roast chicken. I have made the bread sauce myself ; and *such* a basket of strawberries has come from Wickham Hall with Captain Forrester’s compliments. Now don’t cry any more, there’s a dear.”

* * * * *

In Myra’s weak state emotion of any kind was extremely injurious, and the doctor was quite disappointed to find her both weaker and more feverish after Leyton’s visit. Captain Forrester was strictly forbidden for some days, until, in short, the patient had again rallied.

Her improvement was largely assisted by letters from Leyton, who also sent books and periodicals, from which Miss Letitia read aloud for the amusement of her charge.

At length a time was appointed for the interview with Captain Forrester. Myra was anxious to see him, and eager to assure him that she was most desirous he should not trouble himself about the sums he had already disposed of, as she would never claim them.

Leyton was kept in town rather longer than he anticipated, and was still absent when Forrester presented himself. Myra was now able to move about the room without assistance, and rose to receive her visitor.

"Don't! I beg you won't!" was his first exclamation as he entered—well dressed, well groomed, fresh and sandy-coloured, with his usual air of sharp importance. "If you move about, you'll just upset yourself; and there will be an end of our talk."

"I am stronger than you imagine," replied Myra with a pleasant smile, and giving him her hand.

"Deuced good teeth!" was his mental comment. His observation was on the *qui vive*, as if he were buying a horse, in view of his intended proposal. "Glad to hear it, I'm sure. You've been pretty bad, I believe? I can tell you I've been quite uneasy about you, though you *are* going to do me out of a fortune," said Forrester.

"Oh, no—not the whole of it," cried Myra, colouring vividly. "I am quite glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you about it. You do

not suppose I could forget your kindness, your generosity to me? I should like to keep some of the fortune, for it is very nice to have money."

"I believe you," heartily. "It's the devil to be without it. Now, if this is your view of the matter, why, things will arrange themselves. However, I did not come here to talk of business to you; that would be mean on my part—you'd give in too much. No; we'll let the lawyers fight it out. Tell me, what are you going to do when you are able to leave this?"

"I do not know. Mr. Leyton was to consult with the lawyer about finding a home for me."

"Leyton, eh? I wish you would leave it to me."

"Thank you, very much; but, you see, I have known Jack Leyton since I was a little girl."

"Ay, he has the pull there," said Forrester, as if to himself. "Well, we must find you a nice place—nothing ordinary. I'll talk to a cousin of mine—Lady Mary de Vesci. She is a tremendous card about schools and missionaries and distressed gentlewomen—double X as to respectability and that sort of thing. Then you must look out for

the fortune-hunters. They'll be after you like a flock of vultures, by Jove! Oh, you need not be frightened"—laughing at the startled look which came into Myra's eyes—"you hold on to me, and I'll see you through."

There was a pause. Myra leaned back with an air of graceful languor, one white, delicate hand resting on the arm of her chair. Forrester's keen light eyes dwelt on her with much satisfaction.

"Nice compact figure—looks like a gentlewoman into the bargain. I might do worse."

With all his faith in himself Forrester grew nervous.

"It will be deuced annoying if she sheds tears of joy when I ask her; and one can see she's weak. I can't do the sentimental lover, and make an ass of myself." He rose, and looked at one or two of Myra's drawings which were on the wall near the mantelpiece. "I think I can see a way out of this difficulty about a residence. Suppose you come and live at Wickham Hall—eh?"

"At your house!" cried Myra, greatly astonished. "Why, what would your double X respectable cousin say to that?"

"Well caught! She could have nothing to say against it. I ask you to come as mistress of the house—as my wife. Now, there—there's no mistake about it. You see, it would save all bother and injustice. Then we'd share the fortune—you should have a right good settlement, and we'd live happy ever after. What do you say?"

This amazing speech made Myra literally and metaphysically "sit up." She grasped an arm of her chair in each hand, and an amused look made her eyes sparkle.

"What!" she exclaimed, "is it so hard to part with the fortune that you would even marry *me* rather than give it up?"

"Yes, it is an awful wrench; but don't you imagine I should have any objection whatever to marry you. You are a nice, sensible girl, and I don't believe you'd bother me a bit. The generality of women *are* awful bores; but I always liked you, you know. Though you are soft as lamb's wool, I think you're a plucky one. It's the very best way out of the hole; and we might be uncommonly jolly together. What do you think—eh?"

"And you rather liked me always?" asked Myra.

"Yes, I did. I took more notice of you than I did of the generality of women—I am not a lady's man, you know."

"I should think not. Tell me, would your liking have been strong enough to make you wish to marry me had I not turned out an heiress?"

"Well, no—of course not. I should never have thought of it—it wouldn't have done. Unpleasant for the woman, too, in the unequal matches."

"Then, Captain Forrester, you are by your own showing one of the flock of vultures, the fortune-hunters, against whom you warned me!"

"Deuced sharp of you! But I rather like it, I am sharp myself. Come, now! Let us come to the point; is it 'Yes' or 'No?'"

"No! Captain Forrester," with a pretty smile and shake of the head.

"No!" he repeated in incredulous astonishment. "Well, I must say I think you are hasty and ill-judged. Take a day or two to think over it. Just see how it would simplify matters; and I'm not a bad fellow, I can assure you. Wardlaw and Leyton would tell you the same. You should have your own way in your own department. Then the

family diamonds ain't bad, and we'd have 'em reset, so——”

“Captain Forrester,” interrupted Myra, now absolutely laughing, “I don't want to marry a necklace and a pair of ear-rings! You mean well and kindly, but I never could marry anyone I didn't love, and I do not think I could love you, though, no doubt, there are many who might.”

“Yes, yes, I know that!” said Forrester, much perplexed. “But you are the one I want. I should get awfully fond of you, I am sure I should; and it would be such a good arrangement.”

“No doubt it would; but as it is one which would not make *me* happy, why—pray put it out of your head, Captain Forrester.”

“By Jove! it's very annoying that you will not see things in the same light I do. Do not be obstinate, it's an awful fault in a woman, and they almost all have it. I will not consider your decision final; take a day or two to think of it. Ask Leyton's advice, I am sure he will advise you well.”

“And what a pity, Captain Forrester, *you* do not see things in the same light I do. I shall not change my mind in a day nor in a year.”

"It's most astonishing!" exclaimed Forrester in frank surprise. "Well, I'm awfully sorry. I like the money and I like you. I don't want to rob you, and I can't bear refunding what I have taken, so——"

"Dear Captain Forrester!" cried Myra eagerly, "do you think I should be so mean and ungrateful as to be persuaded to ask for anything you have taken, believing it to be your own; *no* one shall induce me to do that. For the rest, we can divide it, somehow, as equitably as possible."

"I think you are a regular brick!" said Forrester, much relieved.

"And, Captain Forrester, do not be angry with me. I should be so pleased if you will keep friends with me. I *do* like you, and you are such an unusual character!"

"Who? Me? Now that's a little too strong. Yes! of course we'll be friends; and, look here! It has just struck me; perhaps you're fond of some other fellow, some poor devil of a teacher without a sixpence. What a lucky beggar he'll be if you stick to him!"

"Yes!" returned Myra with laughing eyes and a

lovely blush. "He is a teacher, and I intend to stick to him if he sticks to me."

"Why, of course he will *now*."

"I am not so sure! he seems a little uncertain."

"What an ass! You chuck him if he is inclined to play fast and loose."

"Oh! I shall not force him to marry me."

"Yes! you chuck him and take me!" Myra laughed and then suddenly grew grave. Was she not drawing down retribution on herself by thus playing on words while she was by no means sure that Leyton was quite of the same mind as when he asked her to be his wife? She grew pale, too, which, for a wonder, Forrester noticed.

"You must be pretty well done," he exclaimed, "so I'll go. I've told them to send over strawberries and flowers and things, and there's a nice light, open carriage in the coach-house; you shall have it every day, you must begin to go out now."

"Thank you very, very much!"

"All right; let me know when you want it."

"The doctor said I might go out to-morrow for a little while."

“Very well, you shall have it to-morrow at two!”

“That is the right time.”

“Good-bye for the present. If you should change your mind,” shaking hands effusively, “just send me a line. I’ll come directly.”

Myra’s first impulse when she was alone was to laugh heartily at the very prosaic proposal she had rejected, but the laugh soon died away. There was something ominous in the change of manner so evident in Jack Leyton. He was most kind, most devoted to her interests, but terribly composed and guarded. Had anything occurred to turn his affection—the affection he had so strongly expressed—into indifference? If so, what was fortune, health, success to her? Nothing, and less than nothing, without Leyton’s love. But Jack was not variable, and she quickly came to the conclusion that the change was wrought by her sudden accession of fortune. He was poor and proud; and he hesitated to renew the offer which he pressed upon her when she had little and he was the better off of the two. This scruple, far-fetched and foolish as it seemed to her, might destroy the joy of her life. Yet how could she surmount it? Must she see the hope which

alone could beautify her existence fading away without an effort to realise it? She could but wait and pray!

Forrester was as good as his word. The carriage appeared next day, and each day after, to Miss Letitia's satisfaction and glorification; then a note reached Myra from its owner, stating that the writer was going up to town, and giving his address in case she should want to write.

Still Leyton prolonged his absence; but he wrote frequently, and had at last, he said, seen a lady in whose house he thought Myra might be happy and comfortable. "I shall come down on Thursday, however, and tell you all about it. So glad to find you are nearly yourself again."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEHIND THE CLOUD THE SUN STILL SHINES.

THOUGH Myra was rapidly gaining strength, and was beginning to lose the alarmingly fragile look which had so much alarmed Leyton, she was still weak enough to be unhinged by the mingled fear and joy with which she anticipated a visit from him.

She did not think it likely he could arrive before three or four o'clock, and had countermanded the carriage in order to be at home at that hour.

How anxiously she had looked in the glass, and observed with pleasure that her cheeks were less hollow; that her eyes had the deeper colour of renewed health. Above all, she thanked heaven that her hair had been spared.

She was now able to read for herself, and, after her eleven o'clock cup of milk and biscuit, lay down on the sofa and tried to compose herself to attend

to her book, when, to her surprise, the ancient Keziah opened the door and said—

“Mr. Leyton, miss. He’s waiting downstairs and wants to know if he may come up.”

“Oh, yes—of course,” cried Myra starting up, and hardly able to see from the wild beating of her heart.

The next moment her hand was in his.

He was looking darker and more worn than when she saw him last; and though his eyes lit up at the sight of her, there was a gloomy expression in them.

“I *am* glad to see you so much more like your old self, Myra,” he said, gazing into her eyes for a moment while he held her hand. “You have got on splendidly during my absence.”

“Then you stayed away a long time,” she returned, drawing a deep breath.

“I had plenty to do, I assure you; and I have heaps of news, which ought to make me welcome.”

Myra smiled a caressing smile.

“I am pleased with the solicitor Forrester’s men recommended, and the sooner you can see him and

hear his propositions the better. I think you might travel to town next week. Then I fancy we have found a suitable abode for you, with a lady—really a lady—who has a pretty little house near Regent's Park. She is the widow of a clergyman, and has two daughters—young things who are being educated. She will come down to be interviewed by you on Saturday, I believe."

"Thank you, Jack. What trouble you have taken for me!"

"It is no trouble, as you very well know; and, Myra, I have had a long talk with the rejected one. Forrester has been telling me his tale of woe."

"Has he? Oh! I wish you could have overheard his address, or addresses. You cannot imagine anything so funny. He was so amazed at my want of taste and judgment."

"He is a curious fellow, but not half bad."

"No; by no means. He is really very good to me, and likes me in his way. Remember, Jack, no one shall persuade me to take back that money he spent."

"No, I don't think anyone will; but, by Jove,

we'll have those thousands out of Mrs. Dallas. If ever there was a schemer, it's that woman. By the way, I have a long complaint of her here from Lady Shirland"—taking a letter from his breast pocket. "She says,"—looking through and turning over a page—"ay, here it is:—

"‘I have had a wretched time since I came down here. First the weather was bad; then Mrs. Dallas arrived, and brought neither sunshine nor calm with her. She was quite full of this strange story about poor Captain Forrester's loss of fortune, and wore me out with explanations of how the certificates were found, and how high and noble her son's motives were in taking them to Forrester, until I quite made up my mind that she knew all about the whole thing from the time she invited poor Miss Dallas to be her child by adoption and grace—adoption and caste would be nearer the mark. She is an *intrigante* of the first water, and I am amazed how Dorothea could ever have been imposed upon by her.’

"Lady Shirland never was taken in in her life, you will observe," interposed Leyton.

"‘As to Dorothea, she has nearly driven me

wild. Nothing would do but to have that handsome young dorkie, Ashby, down here. He came very quickly, and then the nonsense she went on with made me quite ill. You know I am very patient, but I *did* lose my temper at last, and said a few sharp things. Then, if you please, there were hysterics, and faintings, and nerves, and heaven knows what. Finally, she threw herself into that woman Dallas's arms, and begged to be rescued from the tyranny of that cruel stepmother. What do you think of that? And two days after the precious trio set out for Homburg. An hour before they started she and Ashby presented themselves, and informed me they were engaged, and would be married in about two months, on their return from Homburg. All I can say is, "I don't care." On the whole, I am sorry for Ashby. He little knows what he is bringing on himself. Society need not blame *me*—I have done my duty. As for me, I am utterly worn out. As soon as I am a little calmer I shall come up to town on my way somewhere. Be sure you call, my dear boy. I want to hear all about you and your affairs. They ought——' "

Here Leyton broke off abruptly.

"There is nothing more worth reading," he said. "You see, Mrs. Dallas has settled her beloved son at last. It was a grand winding-up."

"Oh, Jack, I am sorry for poor Miss Browne. I am very much afraid Lionel will be unkind and cruel. There is something in Lionel I always shrink from."

"I do not think you need fear for the lovely Dorothea—she is deuced shrewd. She'll have her money tied up, you'll see; and then she'll have the whip-hand of that romantic youth, her *fiancé*."

"I hope so, I'm sure."

There was a pause, broken by Leyton.

"And you feel almost yourself again?" he said, looking at her with the pained, yearning expression in his eyes which stirred her heart whenever she observed it.

"Nearly—not quite. I get dreadfully tired towards the end of the day, and I am stupidly nervous. The idea of meeting this lady who is coming to see me on Saturday makes my heart beat. Can you stay to be with me?"

"I am afraid I cannot; indeed, it would be better to have a *tête-à-tête*—you would understand each other better unhampered by the presence of a third person, who is proverbially in the way."

"Perhaps so," reluctantly.

"I was annoyed with Forrester," resumed Leyton, "for worrying you when you were not equal to the agitation."

"He did not agitate me a bit. I do not care for him, and he does not care for me. It was simply a discussion of ways and means. It amused me. But he has been very nice. I do hope we may keep friends."

"There is no reason why you should not."

Another pause.

"Are you working now, Jack?" asked Myra, timidly.

She was beginning to feel ill at ease with him because of a certain constraint in his manner.

"No; I don't seem to have any power of work—any ideas left in me. And you? I suppose our Paris scheme will fall through now. The heiress of old George Dallas need not daub her pretty fingers with paint."

"If I do not work, Jack, what am I to do? You forget that I have few friends and no kindred. I am alone—I must make some plan of life for myself."

"My dear Myra, friends will flock round you *now* by the hundred."

Myra only shook her head.

"I am afraid I must leave you for the present," resumed Leyton. "I have a commission from Forrester to see to the rearrangement of some pictures, and as I must return to town to-morrow——"

"Oh, no, no!" interrupted Myra, growing very white and clasping her hands, "not so soon. I have so much to say to you, I——"

Leyton rose from his chair and went across to the window before he spoke, then he said rather coldly—

"Of course I shall stay if you want me."

"I have so wished to ask you one question. You will answer truly, I know; you are always true."

"What is it?" said Leyton, looking a little surprised.

"When—when you asked me to be your wife"

—the colour rose quickly in her cheek—“did you know all about me? I don’t mean this latter prosperous part of my story, but the old, unhappy time, when no one thought I had a right to any—name.”

“Don’t distress yourself,” replied Leyton, in a low tone. “I knew it all, Myra, but, of course, it did not affect me.”

“It affected me very much,” said Myra, her fringed lids drooping over her eyes. “Mrs. Dallas said that no gentleman would think of marrying so unfortunate a creature as I was. I thought you did *not* know—that you asked me in ignorance; and that was the reason I said ‘No,’ Jack.”

Leyton was silent for an instant; then he took her hand and kissed it.

“I understand your intention, dear,” he said “but you made me very miserable. You are so good and tender”—here he let her hand go—“that you might have mistaken gratitude for the little help I have been able to give you for the love of which you know perhaps nothing. Now things are so greatly changed that I should not act like a man of honour were I to ask you to

engage yourself to an unlucky devil of an artist—a man who has thrown away his life and his chances so far. You are young—even younger than your years; you have seen nothing of the world; you have scarcely spoken to a man except Ashby and myself. You ought to see what others are like. When you mix in society you will find a dozen suitors—among them, no doubt, a good fellow or two who might love you as you deserve to be loved. Do not tempt me to be false to the trust you put in me, Myra.”

“No matter who may love me in future,” murmured Myra, who had risen and stood leaning one hand and her head against the high mantelshelf, “you are the one that would have taken me from my low estate—who would have given me your name and your life, and——” She stopped.

“And who would have been most richly rewarded had you but consented,” said Leyton almost in a whisper.

“Listen to me, Jack,” she returned, clasping her hands and letting them drop in front of her, “it may sound very bold, but I must say it. You

may be as long as you like making up your mind about what is right or wrong; you may show me all the elegant young or old men in London, but I never will marry anyone but you, Jack. I could not bear it."

"What!" cried Leyton, his eyes aglow with delight and exultation; "do you care for me so much? Do you mean all you say?"

"Are you not linked with all I loved in the past? Have you not been the one—the only one—who felt for me and would have sheltered me in the present?"

She stretched out her hands to him with infinite tenderness and grace, her blue eyes full of tears.

"This is more than a stoic could stand," cried Leyton. "Away with every consideration but the heaven you offer!" He drew her to him in a close embrace, kissing her brow, her eyes, her sweet, tremulous lips, where his own clung fondly till she drew back, startled by the passion she had evoked.

"My darling, you are trembling; you can hardly stand. I ought not to have lost the reins of my

self-control. But you are my own; nothing can part us now. You have given yourself to me freely."

"If you will have me," returned Myra; and hiding her face against his shoulder, a burst of tears relieved her.

What a delicious discussion ensued! What they should do; what they should say; how they should date their engagement from Leyton's first proposal, now nearly two months ago; how they should hurry up the lawyers, and (this urged by Leyton) marry as soon as possible; that Myra should have a home of her own to go to, where (suggested by her) they would have the loveliest of studios, and work with infinite diligence, etc. etc.

* * * * *

The most unimaginative reader can foresee the rest: how matters were happily arranged between Forrester and Myra—easily done when one party was just and the other generous; how Lady Shirland insisted on Myra's wedding taking place at her house; how Forrester gave the bride away, and remained her fast friend ever after; how Dorothea married Lionel and kept his nose to the

grindstone; and how Mrs. Dallas was so impoverished by her restoration of Myra's poor little portion that she was obliged to live in a pretty apartment near the Arc de Triomphe and give musical afternoons instead of dinners, where, nevertheless, people were very glad to go, as everyone met everyone they wished to know; how Mrs. Keene flourished and often visited her dear "missie," and the excellent Foleys kept on the even tenor of their course; how, in short, everything was wound up according to the laws of that high court of poetical justice which governs the ending of books rather than by the grim regulations of reality.

Yet who that has travelled much and far on the dusty, thorny ways of life can doubt that among the struggling mass of competitive humanity there are good hearts and true to leaven the whole lump—souls that rise above selfishness; and strong, tender beings who will bare their backs to the lash if thereby they can save the weaker ones they love? "Of such is the kingdom of heaven."

THE END.

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